

MARCELLA BARCELÓ

IN CONVERSATION WITH HERVE MIKAELOFF AND ELISE ROCHE

The artist must follow the spirit of nature at work in the heart of things and only express themselves through shape and drawing as if it were merely a question of symbols. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling *On the Relationship Between the Fine Arts and Nature*, 1807

Living in the world isn't easy; it is often disenchanted and delivered to us with no poetical precautions at all. Unexpectedly however, sometimes our minds can be filled with wonder when they come into contact with Beauty. This is the experience we have when we are drawn into the works of Marcella Barceló. We first met her in 2020, and although this encounter was brief, it left a deep impression on us. Our connection was strengthened during the *Miss Dior* exhibition at Château de la Colle Noire and then during the 2021 edition of Art Paris 2021, where we signed up for the curatorial course "*Portraiture and figuration, a focus on the French art scene.*" We were therefore naturally pleased to accept the invitation from FORMA to provide a written record of our exchanges with the artist for her personal exhibition.

• Can you tell us how the exhibition was put together? How did you select the works to put on show?

All of the paintings are from this year and late 2021. Ulysse Geissler and Aurélien Jacquin helped me to make a choice at the studio, which was absolutely full to bursting at the time. I couldn't see a thing in there, I needed people whose eye I trust to help me untangle it all. Afterwards I was able to see the thread that connected one painting to another and which led me to the title of the exhibition, *Locus Amoenus*.

• Yes so, where does this title "Locus Amoenus" come from? Which imaginary or mythological world did you borrow it from?

I interpret the topos *Locus Amoenus* as an ideal and therefore utopian place, one that doesn't exist, a paradise that can never be lost because it has never existed. I moved towards this title as I looked into depictions of paradise (the walled garden of Eden, and depictions of Adam and Eve). The garden could be a symbolic summary of the world and its elements: a limited space that contains the essence of the world, like certain Japanese gardens or like *The Aleph* by J.L. Borges. For me it's also the mental space, or what we call in French the secret garden, a place of control and freedom, similar to the equilibrium of a painter in their studio. Eden is also this walled garden, *hortus conclusus*, an ideal of protection against attacks from external reality.

• How do the scenes that feature in your paintings emerge? Do they come from memories, photographs, references from cinema?

I set off from a random starting point and an impulse, a desire for colour or texture, paint dripping vertically or golden yellow, like a hankering for strawberries or tomato juice, a craving. I start out with this approach, always hastily and without any control, I work on several at the same time, it's the moment of urgency. I never know what is going to emerge during that time, it's the most chaotic moment, like a Big Bang. I think about the birth of Venus as described in Hesiod's *Theogony*, the pure image that emerges from a mixture of bodily fluids and sea foam. Painting may be that; the cocktail of rational human thought with the elements that surround us. There is something of alchemy about it, but without the precise measurement, without a specific quest; either way I have no idea what I'm looking for when I go to my studio every day. It's a nameless obsession, maybe a search for the invisible, like trying to remember my most recent dreams.

I don't take any drugs, but I imagine that the quest is a similar one, finding an answer to a question that we can't quite formulate, and every day a new unknown question comes, with the hope of finding its uncertain answer: it's this infinite mechanism that gets me out of bed every morning. The figures arrive like a game: it's like placing a figurine in a nativity scene at Christmas, choosing this spot, or perhaps slightly more to the left of the tree? I take inspiration from the poses we find in mangaka reference books or in fashion illustrations from the 60s which include cut-out paper figurines. I love these doll bodies and their miniature world style. I place them in the middle of the painting as if I had cut them out from somewhere else.

I'm really looking to express this feeling of being a bit lost, of not understanding the world around us, but I also address the question of beginnings, hence the allusions to Eden: the impulsion of a god placing Man, like a doll, in the middle of a garden. How can we exist in this world which eludes us so, how can we control ourselves in the midst of the uncontrollable?

• In one of our conversations, you mentioned your childhood in an isolated spot close to the mountains and the sea. Can you tell us a bit more about it and, by extension, about your relationship with nature? When we look at your works, we get the sense that an impending catastrophe is always looming in the background. The idea of impermanence is something that runs through your work.

From that spot, the view was curved, as if you could see the curve of the earth's surface. The way the mountains stood behind the bay, the mists they were cloaked in at times, the stars in the moonless sky that became more and more difficult to see from year to year due to increasing levels of light pollution. I remember feeling worried when I saw the new buildings going up every summer for tourists. They were multiplying, and along with them came ever more plastic waste on the beaches and a proliferation of jellyfish. There's a term we often hear today, and it expresses what I felt at the time: *eco-anxiety*.

I do paint lots of skyscapes that evoke the moment just before or after a storm, the time before the change comes and the second when we know that nothing will ever be the same as it was before. My obsession with volcanoes is rather similar: I try to capture impermanence, with a danger that is always present and possible, a majestic mountain that may erupt at any moment.

It was a nightmare I often had as a child: the mountain behind our house tearing itself open, the red of the lava appearing. There are often fires in summer in Majorca caused by droughts: they are a spectacular and terrifying vision, the fire drawing closer, the strength of the wind and the things we find afterwards: black skeletons of trees, the stench of charred turtles and then the beautiful hope embodied by the new shoots a few months later. My mother used to tell me that it would never be as it was before, that it would take time, but that in a few years maybe those almond trees would bloom again.

• You often paint nature in an idealised, almost an artificial form. Why so?

I feel that nature has become artificial. It's difficult to find places we haven't altered somehow. We find fluorescent pieces of plastic everywhere, lodged between shells. Some children don't believe it when you tell them that their fish fingers came from a living, swimming animal which was killed. We make oysters produce star-shaped pearls, we force trees to grow straight and when we're in town

we don't know if the birdsong we can hear announces the arrival of spring or is just the ringtone of an iPhone.

Aesthetically, I think I was deeply influenced and marked by the switch from black and white to colour in *The Wizard of Oz*: the appearance of the Technicolor scenery with its iridescent plastic flowers under the studio lights, like Henry Darger's giant flowers.

I also learned a lot from the landscape compositions in *ukiyo-e*¹, where trees, clouds, mountains, the top and the bottom, merge and mix together: a somewhat blurred and misty vision of the world. There's an English term that sums up this state of confused vision really well for me: light-headed.

1. Popular Japanese prints on wood and paintings, literally: "pictures of the floating world"

• We've observed changes in the way you paint: your colour palette has widened, male characters have appeared for the first time, as have certain animals... Where did the series featuring dinosaurs come from, for example?

I'm often initially attracted by a shape, the curve of a diplodocus's back, a flower that resembles a firework, the spiky cypress painted with a single brushstroke. Later on, I then see the symbolism of these elements. For example, the agave flower in *Golden and blue Hours*, is a monocarpic plant, which means that it only flowers once and then dies just afterwards. Its bloom is the precursor of its death. It's this fleeting beauty, the vision of a firework bursting, that I paint for example in *Wallflower*. The symbol of a firework is like a confused state of fear and joy for me.

• The format of some of the paintings exhibited is surprising, we're particularly thinking of *Golden and Blue Hours*, or *For ever and ever*. The technique used is quite distinctive as well: you work with acrylic paints, but not exclusively. You showed us your nail varnishes at the studio. Where did you get this idea from?

Like lots of children, when I used to get bored at mealtimes, I would draw using leftover spots of mustard or the wine that would stain the tablecloth when the meal was over: I still forget now that some coloured stains are not a pot of paint. It's quite similar with the nail varnish, I was putting on some iridescent nail varnish and the colour of it was so singular that I wanted to use it in a painting, a spontaneous act, like the things we distractedly draw during a long telephone call: it provides a little touch of light and volume that differs from acrylics and oils. I use little dots of it, like a decorative element, just as it's supposed to be when we wear it on our fingernails. The saturation in certain areas of my paintings is voluntarily decorative, I think, rather like a peacock's feathers, disproportionate, like a woman wearing lots of makeup, adorned, standing on its own merits.

• Several months of planning have gone into this exhibition and yet the works to be put forward continually change as part of the collective thought process. Can you tell us about the way you draw? Why was important to incorporate it into this story?

Until two years ago, drawing was my main medium; today it's painting. I don't view my drawings as preparatory sketches, but I often draw on days when I don't go to the studio, when I'm at home or travelling, and this is when new pictorial elements come to me. And it's these drawings that order me to get back to the studio quickly, because I draw rapidly, and I build up a lot of images I want to work enlarge and repeat. They are what we could call ideas.

• Where do your titles come from? *Insulin*, *Full Moon Sleepless*...?

Giving titles to my works used to be an exercise I didn't enjoy. I was afraid that a title would limit the picture's possibilities. Today, I've realised that titles actually allow me to add windows of possibility; they are actually as useful as a colour. I often come up with them at the last moment, when time is

running short, before the paintings leave the studio. Most of the time the titles evoke what I see in the works at a particular moment, like two nights of insomnia (*Full Moon Sleepless*). Some titles are also drawn from things I'm reading at the time, mainly poems (Wallace Stevens, Sylvia Plath, Antonio Machado, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, among others...)

• Now we've spoken about how important nature is to you, can you talk a bit about the beings who populate your paintings? Their bodies seem to be reduced to an outline, as if all they ultimately have is their essence.

I view my figures not as bodies but rather as characters. I hope that the fact they're not highly detailed, or that they're sometimes ungendered, allows the viewer to identify with them. This is also why I almost exclusively paint transparent bodies, undefined in terms of their identity and their pictorial materiality, but also because I only paint teenage bodies, which are not definitively defined because they are unfinished, changing and don't have highly visible gender markers.

The poses my figures adopt are fairly static and mainly face-on, as if they are presenting themselves. I collect lots of images from *yūrei* films (Japanese ghost films), and it's this poise, standing straight with their arms at their sides, that is often used when the entity appears (the best known of these is Sadako in *The Ring*). I rarely paint any feet on my characters. Like the prints featuring *yūrei*, this is a way of showing that the ghost is not of our world, it doesn't walk the earth. My characters are often transparent, bodies without organs or they have a ghostly transparency: I view them more specifically as *ikiryō*. *Ikiryō* are ghosts of people who are still alive but who have an ability to duplicate themselves and haunt other places. I often say that these characters in my paintings are a bit like *ikiryō* of myself. In material terms, I tend to place them in spaces that are almost empty, where there is the least material, the least paint. It's the paint around them that brings them into existence, as it traces their outline. They are rather like imprints, like when you pick a leaf up off the floor on a snowy day, the empty outline remains visible, the memory of it. This is the way I view memories, like lingering impressions, like ghosts.

• There really is an almost magical and protective dimension to your works. Could we say that you have an animistic vision of the world? What is your connection to the spiritual and the sacred side of life?

As I discovered Shintoism, I made a connection between my relationship with nature and the *kami* (Shinto deities). The *kami* can be found hiding everywhere, they're ambivalent - benevolent but also capable of extreme violence, like nature: rain helps the fields to grow but can also flood them.

I actually sometimes view the act of painting like a method of divination: the uncontrolled aspect of painting, the accidents and the images they give rise to are like a tealeaf reading, following the footprints of a fox. We see what we would never have found if everything had been carefully

controlled and there were no pareidolia. For me, the power of images is that they are better at hiding secrets than words are, because words have a fixed definition set out in dictionaries. Shapes and colours have greater freedom and can contain distinct symbols that come together and mutate. Furthermore, people I'm close to often say that they've found secrets or shared memories in my paintings and drawings, intimate things that we wouldn't tell strangers. I do place many memories in my works, but they're distorted, like fragments recovered from a dream or the Bachelardian idea that everything must be dreamt before it can be seen.

Painting was born from animistic and religious beliefs, and I hope that today it can retain the magic of a fetish, a commixture of materials and thoughts, which we often tend to forget in our world so saturated with intangible and transient images. I would love my paintings to one day become *tsukumonogami*¹.

1. In Japanese folklore, Tsukumogami are objects that come to life on their one hundredth birthday.