

# Annette Barcelo

## Live Your Transformation

der TANK, Basel

Curated by Chus Martínez  
Curatorial assistance Tabea Rothfuchs

10 – 18 June 2023

Special opening  
Tuesday 13 June 2023, 6 – 9 pm

Followed by: Birthday Apéro, CIVIC x Institute Art Gender Nature

[dertank.space](http://dertank.space)

The history of women and privacy is a long and painful one. It is, interestingly, also the history of women performing the ritual of washing themselves. The Italian Renaissance saw the emergence of a plethora of scenes of deities bathing, in which we see women enjoying the daily rituals of washing and delighting in water. The Renaissance lamented the lost tradition of bathing, so well-known to the ancient Greeks and Romans, and constructed the myth of the Middle Ages as an obscure, unhygienic era. Bathing became a symbol of progress, control, perception and presentation of the body in public. But, in portraiture, bath-time also became a chance to explore women's bodies, an exploration that, for centuries, allowed women's bodies to be exposed to the gaze and desire of men. Portraying the bathing body exposes the ancient relationship between women and purity. Seldom, if ever, does culture question the purity of men, the smell of their bodies – or, more precisely, of their genitals.

The “allure” too often mentioned by art historians when speaking of women in the bath, or the “bliss of nudity” and how bathing itself continues to be an opportunity for “rebirth” whenever we step into the tub, can also be a curse. Through a well-established genre in painting and art history, this curse has, for centuries, created a “truth set in stone” about the beauty and importance of the clean female body, the clean woman, the pure woman, the woman who lives up to men's standards, the silent woman bathing while being watched by the whole world. And this “being watched” is another curse: art and painting, in particular, have participated for centuries in the surveillance of individuals who, apparently, need it lest they disobey. Women bathing are often portrayed as if unaware of the presence of the guardians, guardians synonymous with the voyeurs beholding their bodies. There is a “creaturesque” impetus in these millions of scenes presenting women bathing as a natural act, like hot or thirsty animals wallowing at a waterhole.

*Live Your Transformation* is Annette Barcelo's first institutional solo exhibition in years, more than a decade in fact. She is well-known as an artist in her community, around Basel and especially among her fellow artists. Yet constant surface interaction among friends and colleagues often creates blindness towards the work and its true import. It is no easy task to approach and research the work of those close to us with the same passion as we do those at a distance. It is, nevertheless, vital to reflect on and discuss this question. For decades now, we have been trying

to deconstruct first, and then to contest standards created by modernity for our social and academic behaviors. But it is still difficult for small smart communities like ours in Basel to understand their own cultural conditions, languages and methods and to nurture esteem for them. It is of fundamental importance to become aware of the traits making up the specificity of communities if we are to address the complex histories of reception that have influenced their mainstream artistic languages. It is also fundamental to become aware of the weakness in recognizing and giving a place to many women artists, not just a few exceptions. If undertaken a million times in the many territories around us, this task would unquestionably help create a different cultural ecosystem, a different inter-generational conversation and a better knowledge of what we can share and give that others may need or find interesting.

This exhibition raises a number of questions around how to exhibit and the language in which to approach the work of an artist so present in a place, yet so unexplored in depth and detail. The vast number of works carefully arranged in her studio and storeroom speak of a confidence and trust in her own practice, as well as a unique reflection on the languages and subjects that have inhabited for decades her works. It is almost impossible to exhibit the “trust in her work.” However, since the exhibition space is part of our Institute Art Gender Nature HGK Basel FHNW, that particular trait constitutes an invaluable legacy to pass on to younger generations of artists. After reflecting together about the form and function of this exhibition, we decided that it is an exhibition about certain groups of works—produced mostly in the early 1990s—and a few more contemporary ones to help us understand the enduring presence of certain hand-made motifs and myths over her long career.

This exhibition is an invitation to concentrate on a specific part of Annette Barcelo’s work: the bath-tub series. Here we repeatedly see one scene: a woman in a bath-tub surrounded by figures watching her intensely. You may be familiar with Pierre Bonnard’s *Nude in the Bath* (1940), where a woman is submerged in a bath, her body almost merging with the water, which both shields her from prying eyes and also makes her one with an elementary life-force. The scene depicted by Barcelo emerges from this long history of female bodies in water, taking their bath. Here, far from being an elementary life-force, water could also be the cosmic flow of a force, a current: able to take away life and the pain of life, to separate us from a world where dark forces threaten our well-being. Those watching figures are actually stalking, applying pressure, obliging the female figure to take refuge in her bath. We all sense her sensing that they may not dare to cross that boundary and enter the water. Yet it is also hard to imagine how she can leave that temporary “safe” space and re-enter the world. In her book, *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry—an amazing thinker—writes about three subjects:

“first, the difficulty of expressing physical pain; second, the political and perceptual complications that arise as a result of that difficulty; and third, the nature of both material and verbal expressibility or, more simply, the nature of human creation. [...] Physical [and, I would add, mental] pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story, and the story that it tells is about the inseparability of these three subjects, their embeddedness in one another.”<sup>1</sup>

This series of works by Annette Barcelo is important: it truly manages to express and convey the dark forces that are the source of a pain that may never fade, a pain not only personal but cultural and social—intensely so—when it comes to the female figure. But the series is important for another reason too: the bath-place became a dwelling, an almost magical spring that made possible a different way of imagining life. From this pain a whole new world came to co-exist with the real material world: a universe populated by the animalesque and the dynamic forces of the

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford University Press, 1985, preface.

carnavalesque, by the possibilities of escaping the shape and matter of our bodies through anthropomorphic transformations and the constant renewal of anthropophagic moments in which total destruction is replaced by cosmic digestion.

In the years following the conception of this series, Barcelo's work has concentrated on these impulses. We can, then, see this bath-tub series as a core work: a cosmic punch within her practice, but also a punch aimed at us all, full of strength and running all the way through her drawings and glassworks. These are pieces whose formal language refuses the outward form of the modern and harks back to a vernacular tongue capable of connecting with the myths of her place—Basel—and the beliefs of a time when the real and the imagined were not separate. Her interest in animals and plants is related to her interest in decentering the human position as the only subject of events and emotions in the world. Her portraits of animals, both in her paintings and drawings, also serve another function. Barcelo gives us a composite of myths and stories that speaks of a world running parallel to the factual world. There is a temporal dimension in her human chronicles that is not recounted in our history books. Over and over again in her numerous drawing series, she portrays creatures capable of forming a cosmology ruled by the dynamic forces of parahuman and animal figures, figures that live beyond the rational logic animating our daily lives. She balances the darkness that too often surrounds the real world with another inhabited by creatures capable of far more than we are. They observe and accompany our existence from their own dimension, beyond the real. Producing this dimension is an act of daydreaming which we might term psychohistory: through this universe, Barcelo reminds us that to make sense of what happens to us, for real, we also need to gain an understanding of people's unconscious lives and fantasies. Disclosing the world of private fantasy and acting it out on the public stage is a valuable function of art. Our way of life produces isolation, alienation, loss of identity and dislocation. How not to become a broken being? How can we invent a language that becomes a source of energy we can inject back into the world to alleviate these feelings? Barcelo's entire artistic output centers on the recollection of dreams and the creation of a grammar capable of rendering those invisible worlds of visions and dreams visible. Her work embodies an effort to avoid the binary of the real and the unreal by stating the existence of a third world, one that acts as a troubadour figure inhabiting all possible intersections between realms of the real, between genres and disciplines, between what is alive and what is not: a troubadour-world that makes all other worlds dance to uncanny forces, creating alliances with us weak and greedy humans and giving us strength and hope.

The exhibition's title is a reframe of an imperative from the pen of Switzerland-based German poet Rainer Maria Rilke: "*Du musst dein Leben ändern*"—"You have to change your life."<sup>2</sup> Live your questions, he once wrote, and maybe one day you will be able to live some answers. Like the life's work of Annette Barcelo, Rilke's writing puts great trust in experience, trust that implies suffering but also joy. Experience emerges as the contrary of avoidance: it embodies the courage to confront, to fail, to pursue, to remain relevant for oneself and others, to be. This exhibition could not be in a better place. It brings us not only a magnificent oeuvre, but a testimony of life as an artist.

Chus Martínez

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<sup>2</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Archaischer Torso Apollons* [Archaic Torso of Apollo], 1908.

**Annette Barcelo** was born in Basel, where she lives and works. She attended the Schule für Gestaltung Basel. For more than five decades she has worked continuously, often in series and in different techniques such as painting, drawing and graphic prints, on her specific visual language, which explores the connections of the manifold areas of life and mythologies. Since the 1980s, the artist's works have been exhibited at Galerie Anne de Villepoix in Paris, Galerie Mäder in Basel, and the Aargauer Kunsthaus in Aarau, among others.

**der TANK** is the exhibition space of the Institute Art Gender Nature, Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW—a glass cube located at the heart of the Campus Dreispitz in Basel. It hosts a series of commissioned art projects by international artists linked with the institute, as well as by former students and lecturers called *The Commissions*. The series *Students' Realm* features exhibition projects by students.

*Live Your Transformation* is generously supported by:



### Opening hours

Saturday and Sunday 2 – 6 pm

During Art Basel: Wednesday to Sunday 2 – 7 pm

And by appointment: [dertank.hgk@fhnw.ch](mailto:dertank.hgk@fhnw.ch)

### der TANK

Institute Art Gender Nature HGK Basel FHNW, Freilager-Platz 1, Basel/Münchenstein  
Tram 11, station Freilager

### Additional information

[dertank.space](http://dertank.space)

[dertank.ch](http://dertank.ch)

[fhnw.ch/hgk](http://fhnw.ch/hgk)

### Press contact

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