

Anthropology Atomic: Carlos Betancourt

by Wesley Grissom

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For Carlos Betancourt, examining & experiencing culture is essential to stimulating creativity. Throughout his career, the artist's flamboyant oeuvre has explored issues of personal identity, heritage, and transculturation.

The artist grew up in Puerto Rico and moved to Miami over thirty years ago- falling immediately for the energy and élan of South Beach, a mid-century modern milieu.

"South Beach is a place of living culture... people live life as art," Betancourt explains.

He finds stimulation in the idyllic surroundings of his neighborhood as well as travels abroad. While his early work focused on interpreting ancient rituals and primitive traditions, travel and material objects define his latest creations.

Recent trips, including Africa and the Greek Isles, have allowed the wandering artist to immerse himself in new customs and ways of life. "I want to understand the mysteries of each place—to erase my background and possess those cultures," he explains with his normal esprit.

The influence of these journeys manifest in imagery and titles (such as "Of Kenya and Candies," a 45-foot long mural-cum-zebras for a gallery in Texas) while a more subtle connection with travel can be drawn from his new "X-ray" series—black and white photographs which depict quintessential Betancourt imagery in reverse (like his signature.)

The electromagnetic waves of X-rays reveal artistic mysteries shrouded for centuries under oils and soot. They also serve as a way for Transportation Security Administration officials to screen baggage and passengers prior to flights.

As a frequent traveler and perpetual creative, Betancourt's familiar experiences before the boarding gate prove as influential as the thrill of the destination in uncovering the cultural conundrums he mentions.

After undergoing an elaborate, self-created layering process on the computer, his photographic memories dissolve into contemporary black and white "radiographs," combining nostalgia with technology.

SOUTHERN BEAU

Betancourt has been a driving force behind the contemporary art scene in south Florida since immigrating. His studio in the eighties and nineties was a hub for influential creatives who helped define the city's artistic pulse.

His individuality is woven through the cultural fabric of Miami, a metropolis hosting a creative contagion since Art Basel's inception 10 years ago. Each year Betancourt is a visible fixture during the festivities at the Switzerland contemporary art fair's warm winter twin.

When an invitation from the official Art Basel Miami Beach 2011 Studio Visit Program arrived, Betancourt opened his doors to share his newest work, inviting conversations with patrons, art critics, and curators alike.

Imposing photographs from the "El Portal" series (named for the neighborhood where his lushly landscaped, sunny studio resides) defined the space. The digital compositions depict the artist floating in a dreamy version of his work-space amongst tropical foliage, occasional fauna, modern furniture, mid-century ephemera, and general joie de vivre.

Like Betancourt's bungalow, the photographs seamlessly integrate indoors and out, highlighting his organic blend of life and work. For studio goers during Art Basel, walking amongst the parallel worlds created a multi-sensory viewing experience.

Even when removed from the studio, the monumental size of the works maintains a similar surreal dynamic. Reaching over 9 feet wide, these photographs intrinsically welcome the viewer into Betancourt's personal meditations.

BETANCOURT IN JACKSONVILLE Three large-scale works from the "El Portal" series (on view at J. Johnson Gallery through April 6) envelop the viewer in the artist's mesmerizing world. Gallery director Bruce Dempsey was excited when he first saw these new photographs in Betancourt's studio last December.

"Jennifer [Johnson, gallery owner] and I were impressed immediately by how fresh this body of work is," Dempsey recalls. He knew it would be a strong addition to Betancourt's spring exhibition at the Jacksonville Beach gallery.

"We've been showing Carlos's work for over 10 years and we're proud of how he continues to progress," the director explains. "Carlos has broadened and reinvented his vocabulary of images in an impressive way."

Also included in the exhibition of the artist's recent work are refined kaleidoscope-like photographs, the latest incarnation from his "Re-Collections" series. Ranging from four to six feet square, these monochromatic creations examine Betancourt's eclectic object collections with a focus on symmetry and pattern (rather than the flamboyant colors and freeform compositions of their predecessors.)

INVENTIVE MATERIALS Carlos Betancourt has developed a name for himself as a photographer and his works on paper can be found in collection such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. His self-portraits are even installed on the exterior of Miami Beach's Sagamore Hotel, a South Beach icon celebrated for its impressive art collection.

Betancourt's creativity is not limited to photography, however. In addition to over-the-top photo performances (which offered him additional roles of choreographer, set director and prop master) the artist has explored mixed media works in many capacities over past decades.

"The art always tells me the medium—it is a natural process for me," the artist explains. He explores non-traditional materials a la Vik Muniz and was snapping glitter, glamour, and extravagance before Marilyn Minter.

Betancourt has a history of creating site-specific commissions, both public and private, out of a variety of materials—wood, stone, glass, bronze, even Swarovski crystals. Robert Farris Thompson, Dean of Art History at Yale University, discussed the artist's monumental 2000 "Sound Symbols" beach sculpture and how "Miami art enthusiasts celebrated this work as the first major project since Christo's Surrounded Islands."

The artist's mixed media work can be found in the Miami International Airport and periodically pops up elsewhere in the public eye. However, his three dimensional works have only recently become available to private collectors.

BETANCOURT IN JACKSONVILLE The exhibition at J. Johnson Gallery showcases Betancourt's three-dimensional work alongside his newest photographs. A quartet of vibrant blue sculptures, perched precariously on cake stands, reveal knick knacks, fruit, toys and kitsch yard art. Combined, cast and coated in paint, these create nostalgia for nuclear domesticity and the atomic age.

The "Of Cakes and Scrapbooks," series debuted at the Miami Art Museum's annual ball, one of the hottest tickets during Art Basel 2011. M.A.M.'s fabulous 10th anniversary fete took place inside the Fontainebleau Miami Beach- a mid-century modern gem designed by Betancourt's architectural and artistic icon, Morris Lapidus.

As a featured artist that evening, Betancourt was commissioned to create ten artworks to crown the tables of the elite fundraiser and his kitsch kitchen confections were born. The neo-baroque building offered a perfect backdrop for his mod-inspired masterpieces, which were later auctioned off to support the museum.

A similarly blue bronze totem balances objects common and rare as if they are climbing from Betancourt's subconscious. "Every work of mine dwells on memories, going back to my childhood," he says. His work offers sentimentality for simpler times and fond memories as well as a neo mid-century aesthetic.

Betancourt continues the theme with "Shopping Cart Atomic," comprising a buggy and an eclectic selection of objects, all swathed in blue. He explains how his one-of-a-kind sculpture "commemorates the freedom to acquire " and is "more a celebration of consumerism than a critique."

The azure sculptures in the show can only be described as "Betancourt blue"—a hue that defies characterization (like the artist's broad style and diverse influences.) This color is a cocktail of sea, sky, Yves Klein and Bill Viola, zested with the artist's own panache.

Like his photographs, the three-dimensional lapis creations at Johnson Gallery read electric, offering Carlos Betancourt's exuberant vitality to the viewer.

Carlos Betancourt's recent works are on view at J. Johnson Gallery through April 6. 177 4th Ave. N., Jacksonville Beach 32250 Gallery hours are Tuesday through Friday from 10 -5 and Saturdays from 1-5. www.jjohnsongallery.com