

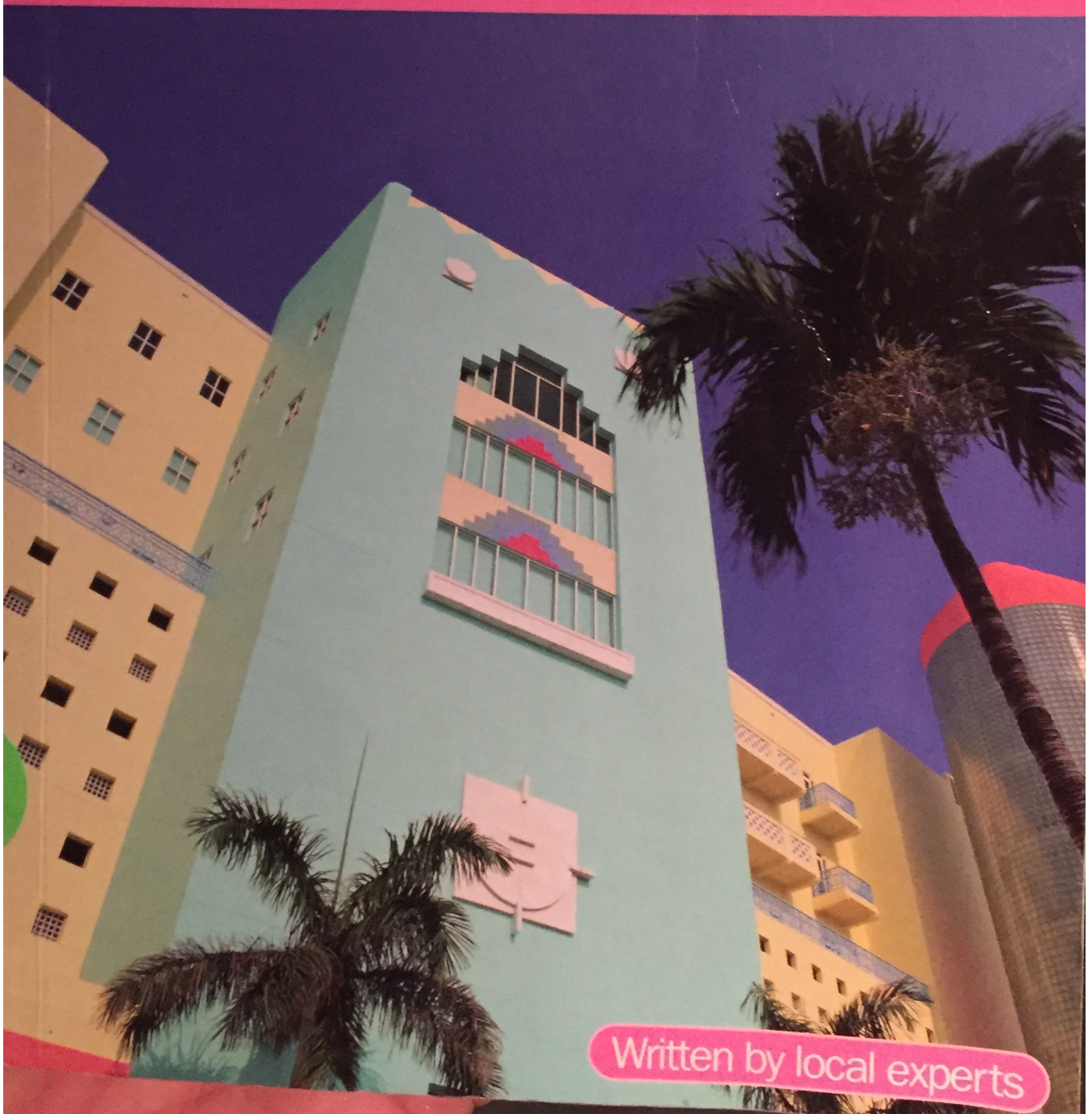
Time Out

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The Times

Miami

& the Florida Keys



Written by local experts

Pop goes Miami



Portrait of a Dream VII.

Arts & Entertainment

'You can't separate Warhol from New York, Picasso or Dalí from Spain, and you can't separate me from Miami Beach.' So says Carlos Betancourt (pictured, right), local artist, celebrity and man about town. Certainly, Miami is written all over his work. His flamboyant photographs are slick and sexy, glam and trashy, sterile yet lush. Peopled by a Warhol-esque cast of local characters – from drag queens to beauty queens, muscle mays to society mavens – they are rich in colour and bathed in sunlight. Other Miami motifs include nature versus consumerism and nods to the artist's Caribbean roots.

His work may be parochial, but its appeal is universal: his photographs are now part of the permanent collections at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, as well as the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC. Not that Betancourt, 42, has joined the establishment. 'To play remorselessly is my mission. I could never be one of these artists who dresses in black, takes themselves seriously and tries to be profound. When critics say that my work is kitsch, I say "Thank you".'

Critics have in fact called him Miami's Andy Warhol. Betancourt also cites Damien Hirst and Keith Haring as influences. But his true inspiration, he says, is Morris Lapidus, the Miami architect who built gaudy modernist hotels including the Fontainebleau Hilton in the 1950s – and whom critics once dismissed as vulgar. 'Morris brought art to the people. He was accessible. Some artists try to get very intellectual, and they fail. Lots of artists are terrified of beauty, but I embrace it.' Even if it comes in the form of junk culture. One recent work, *Re-Collections*, was an installation of hundreds of old glass Christmas ornaments. In another, Betancourt is naked with a pink plastic flamingo.

Betancourt likes to get naked. He's certainly got the body for it (*People* magazine once featured him in their

50 Most Beautiful People issue). But his chiseled torso is often covered in Caribbean-style body painting – a nod to his roots (he was born in Puerto Rico).

Indeed, beneath the glitter lies a deep nostalgia. 'My work is attached to the past,' he says. 'I collect people, I collect ornaments, I use artifacts. But I bring the past into the present.' In one work, for instance, glitzy Miami Beach is imprinted with an ancient Caribbean symbol. 'It's all to do with trying to leave a mark, with figuring out where you belong.'

Surely the place he belongs is Miami. 'There's a lot of tackiness and artificiality in Miami, but that's not such a bad thing. I prefer it to the coldness of New York. If someone is fake here, it's transparent, you can tell right away. In New York, it takes a couple of years. Everyone tells me I have to move to New York for work. But I'm not going anywhere.'

Carlos Betancourt is represented by the Diana Lowenstein Fine Arts (see below) and is part of the collection at the Bass Museum of Art (see p72); www.carlosbetancourt.com