

Celebrated artist, inaugural poet will be at Books & Books on Sunday



Poet Richard Blanco, left, and artist Carlos Betancourt will discuss how their craft and friendship have influenced their work for the past 22 years. The event will take place March 20 at Books & Books in Coral Gables. (Carlos Betancourt/Courtesy)



By **Johnny Diaz · Contact Reporter**
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One is a renowned Cuban-American poet. The other, a celebrated Puerto Rican artist.

Both grew up in Miami. And for more than 22 years, friends and former partners Richard Blanco and Carlos Betancourt have influenced one another through their crafts.

Their personal and creative collaborations will be the focus of "Between Friends/Entre Amigos: The Shared Journey of Artist Carlos Betancourt and Poet Richard Blanco," a free discussion set for March 20 at Books & Books in Coral Gables.

"Carlos and I have always shared a mutual fascination for the mystery of memory, place, belonging and identity," said Blanco, who plans to read poems that were influenced by Betancourt.

One of the poems, titled "Cheers to Hyakutake," centers around a camping trip the men shared at Everglades National Park, where they saw a comet.

"Both of our works tell stories rooted in our unique experience, yet somehow transcend to the universal," said Betancourt, a mixed-media artist who helped foster the Miami art scene in the 1980s. "I think, most importantly, he influences me in the way he sees or feels some things and translates it into words, questioning emotion and science simultaneously."

Before catapulting to fame as the inaugural poet for President Barack Obama in 2013, Blanco had published several books of poetry, including 2005's "Directions to the Beach of The Dead (Camino del Sol)." The book's cover bears a photograph of a shirtless Blanco with text and symbols that Betancourt had painted on the poet's body.

Shot in Miami Beach by Betancourt, the image was part of the artist's series of photographs titled, "Interventions in Nature."

"It questions our attempts to belong to nature," said Betancourt, a graduate of The Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale.

In addition to photography, Betancourt's art straddles various mediums, including sculptures, self-portraits, large paintings and installations that carry themes of memory and ancestry through layered colorful displays. His work has been featured in public collections such as The Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Most recently, Skira Rizzoli Publishing released a coffee table book, "Imperfect Utopia," which features more than 200 pages of Betancourt's art. The book's text is by Paul Laster and Robert Farris Thompson, and Blanco wrote the foreword.

After their discussion, the men are scheduled to sign books.

"The intent of the evening is to let the audience share in an intimate conversation about art and poetry through the lens of our personal lives and our friendship," added Blanco.

"Between Friends" is free and begins at 4 p.m. March 20 at Books & Books, 265 Aragon Ave., Coral Gables. Info: 305-442-4408, booksandbooks.com. The website will livestream the event.