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VICTORIA JUSTICE

RENAISSANCE MAN

Carlos Betancourt's glittery story guides a South Florida art revival.

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outh Florida artist Carlos Betancourt proudly uses his art to bare himself to the world, both literally and figuratively. Almost salaciously, his titillating works provide unfettered access to his deepest memories, most scandalous desires and most flamboyant excesses to reveal a man infatuated with life itself.

Betancourt's story is quintessentially American. His parents were Cuban exiles living in Puerto Rico who moved to Miami in the early 1980s to improve work prospects for themselves and their son. It was a time of diametric shift in the city, which was experiencing growing pains after nearly 125,000 Cuban immigrants fled to the United States. This sudden onset caused racial tensions in an already fragile ecosystem. No longer the prom queen she once was, South Florida looked haggard and used. The beach was seedy, cheap and perfect for a young bohemian.

An effortless conversationalist, Betancourt's passions and vigor spring forth, evincing a life filled with travel and nature, family and friends, and genuine veneration for how he came to be. Speaking with a Caribbean lilt, Betancourt giddily reminisces about when conceptual installation artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude surrounded 11 islands in Biscayne Bay with 6.5 million square feet of pink fabric. The year was 1983, and 17-year-old Betancourt did not know who the artists were. He merely raised his hand when asked if he wanted be one of many junior volunteers stretching meters of floating

polypropylene around the bay. Upon realizing the importance of being part of art history, Betancourt became a self-proclaimed "groupie," and he evolved an artistic trajectory that drove him forward.

As the world swirled around him, Betancourt, who graduated from the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale, found peace by surrounding himself with fellow creatives: artists, poets, drag queens, comedians, musicians and the other colorful personalities frequently orbiting Miami Beach. His dingy 1,000-square-foot Lincoln Road studio was dubbed "Imperfect Utopia," a metaphor for what South Florida was at the time. It became the nucleus of a cultural renaissance that decades later would culminate in December's Art Basel Miami Beach. What New York's CBGB was to punk music and Barcelona's Els Quatre Gats was for Surrealism, Betancourt's Imperfect Utopia perhaps became a burgeoning art scene in a city that yearned for a cultural catharsis. Imperfect Utopia, he states, "was a great platform because it was completely open to invention."

Betancourt's effusive energy and open-door studio attracted a broad spectrum of like-minded individuals whose unique stories and experiences colored his perceptions, informed his art and fertilized his creativity. Famed MiMo architect Morris Lapidus visited the studio often and regaled Betancourt with stories of Miami's Golden Age, when he was designing the Fontainebleau and Eden Roc hotels and turning Lincoln Road into the pedestrian mall Betancourt called home.

COLOR ME RAD Known for a certain bravado, Botancourt has used glitter in his works, oftentimes as a symbolic gesture.

"We are our memories.
That's what we do, that's
what we accumulate."
—Carlos Betancourt

"I remember no one knowing who Morris was, so I always use him as a metaphor of that period," Betancourt says. "He had done things that the world had forgotten. Then time passed, and he had the recognition. What he offered aesthetically to this day is so influential."

In the 1980s, the Art Deco preservation movement, including the integration of Lapidus into the pantheon of great architects, precipitated nostalgia about what South Florida once was. Further, it fostered a growing optimism about a coming creative renaissance. The beach scene was starting to become younger, edgier and more party-friendly. Fashion mogul Gianni Versace, as well as photographers Bruce Weber and Bunny Yeager, painter Julian Schnabel and musician Celia Cruz all paid visits to Betancourt to soak in his vitality. In turn, this environment formed a distinctive textural landscape that now spans the way Betancourt creates art, utilizes media and indulges in the passions around him.

Betancourt's work became an organized cacophony of scattered influences. Incorporating disparate yet recognizable elements—such as sun-bleached wood, a broken plastic torso, a rotary phone and an oversized fish bowl—he smothers the pile of kitsch with wax-like ooze, often co-opting sculptor Yves Klein's signature blue or pop icon Robert Indiana's primary red as a unifying factor. Much like Miami Beach during the 1980s, Betancourt's art has grit to it, but he adds glitter.

"It's a contradiction," he states proudly. "That's the entire idea of it."

Often using friends, local personalities and his own body as a canvas, Betancourt creates glyph-laden photographic armies of animated caricatures and surrealist narrative tales of lost souls seeking common ground. Old becomes new as found objects morph into otherworldly contraptions splattered and reassembled. Broken porcelain plates and nail-ridden wood slats are repurposed and given new life within a viscous morass of bold color.

Recently released, the colorful and lushly illustrated Skira Rizzoli coffee-table book, "Carlos Betancourt: Imperfect Utopia," presents the artist's work in

unapologetic luster. From his Caribbean roots to his tastes for all things beautiful, Betancourt's inexhaustible creativity makes this tome an intimate diary that, left unlocked, is laid open for all to read. We are scandalously allowed a voyeur's look inside his head. Pages turn between photographic collages, utilizing layered leftovers from his parents' sojourn from Cuba to Puerto Rico, combined with contemplative and muscled forms caked with mud, cigarettes and primitive runes. Other forms burst with kaleidoscopic energy and monochromatic glow as intense as Betancourt himself.

"Everything is up for grabs," he says, in reference to the new book. "We are our memories. That's what we do, that's what we accumulate and try to organize our life."

Remembering the value of getting his hands proverbially dirty, Betancourt and his partner and manager, Alberto Latorre, recently purchased a lot in the growing art hub Little Haiti to build a small studio space. "It's a very simple lot, but it offers me more opportunities to express myself," Betancourt says.

Betancourt continues to weave visual stories with poles magnetically juxtaposed. Caribbean and American, nature versus the city, gay and straight, muted and bold, pristine and dilapidated, and experimental and deliberate, coalesce. Images spring forth in an explosion that takes time to dissect and process. This is what makes Betancourt unique and has allowed him to transcend the Miami arts scene dominated by large-scale international exhibitions and blue-chip names of the past.

Where he was once at the forefront of South Florida's art scene, Betancourt's works now are in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale, Pérez Art Museum Miami, the Museum of Latin American Art, Museo de Arte de Ponce, the National Portrait Gallery and other international venues. A fitting culmination to a vision germinated in a small, dirty studio on Lincoln Road. ■