



VISUAL ARTS

Carlos Betancourt talks Memory, Identity and Illuminations

Posted by JORDAN LEVIN on JUNE 14, 2017

1

I've been friends with artist Carlos Betancourt since the now-famous Imperfect Utopia days on Lincoln Road in the early 90's, when his studio was a gathering place for the community of artists and art lovers, thrift shop glamour pusses, experimental designers, South Beach socialites (we didn't call it Sobe yet), the simply fabulous and those who just wanted to have fun outside conventional shallow shiny Miami party life. (As South Beach rose, some big world stars also came to visit: Octavio Paz, Audrey Hepburn, and Carlos' aesthetic heroes like Morris Lapidus and Celia Cruz.)

Carlos loved beautiful things and he filled Imperfect Utopia with them: swooping colored glass objects, graceful furniture he designed himself, his paintings. How he could afford this stuff was a bit of a mystery, (although the rent of \$260 a month, which the landlord was often afraid to come collect, helped.) But he made Imperfect Utopia into a small fantasy world in a room. I included him in one of my first freelance assignments for the Miami Herald, a story about art in clubs: he'd created an installation of gold and silver painted shoes on the ceiling of a now-forgotten club on 23rd Street, shimmery dancing feet embedded in the air.



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Cover of Carlos Betancourt's "Imperfect Utopia" book published by Rizzoli

"Anything but being bored," he once told his longtime partner, the architect Alberto Latorre. "It's the worst thing in the world."

So it was pretty embarrassing that so much of what Carlos said at [Primary](#) (formerly Primary Projects) in the Design District last Thursday, when he was interviewed by Brandi Reddick, Miami Beach's Cultural Affairs Program Manager, was new to me.

He talked about the importance of memories to his work, of how he's come to understand that your place and history are central to him as an artist.

"Once you embrace your own source, your own place with your own memories, you can start to find your own voice," he said. "You cannot take Pittsburgh and New York out of Andy Warhol, you cannot take Spain out of

Picasso, or the moment he borrowed a friend's African mask. The local can become the universal. My path is the personal.”

Ah, of course. Carlos likes color, abundance, voluptuous bodies of all kinds, overgrown tropicalia, kitsch, shiny stuff, symbolism (he can write backwards perfectly, btw), putting himself and his friends and his partners in his work. All him, all very Miami, very Caribbean.



Carlos Betancourt (far left) with a young fan lighting up “Times of Illumination” at Primary (photo Jordan Levin)

Growing up in Puerto Rico, where his family lived after fleeing Cuba, he remembered magical-seeming Christmas trees glowing in doorways during holiday *parandas*. And because his mother gave away their Christmas ornaments w

hen they moved to Miami, Carlos began collecting what became thousands of ornaments. Including the glittering tree-topper stars-on-the-wall that make up the extravagantly titled *Times of Illumination: For the Sake of Beauty in Primary's Motion of Movements* show, which he lit up with a dramatic wave of a toy wand, to cheers from the audience. (Carlos always draws an audience.)

Memories of building sandcastles on the beach became an installation of hundreds of geometrically formed sand mounds. For another piece, he covered his deceased grandmothers's stuff, her chair and dozens of objects from her home, with cobalt blue – in African spiritual systems, an empowering color that keeps evil at bay.

One of his obsessions is the disappearing history of Miami's artists, and the cultural history before Art Basel made Miami believe its visual art scene mattered. "There's just a massive void here, so many stories here that should have been told, and no one's telling them," he said. But some of them, anyways, are captured in Carlos Betancourt's work.