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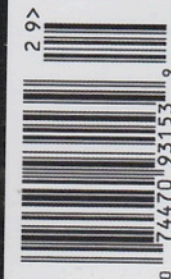
NICOLA COSTANTINO



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REVIEWS & NEWS





# Carlos Betancourt

A Singular Collective Memory  
Una memoria colectiva singular

By / por **Simón Flores**  
(Barcelona)

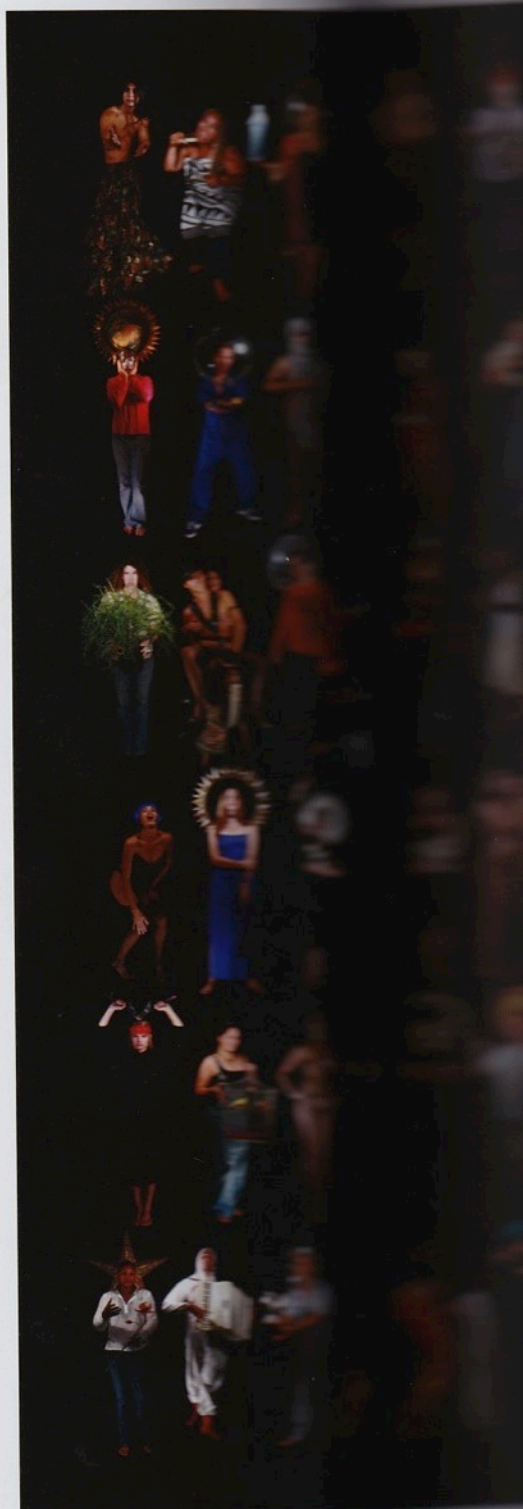
“How can the currents of collective thought whose impetus lies in the past be recreated when we can grasp only the present?” writes Maurice Halbwachs in his posthumous work *On Collective Memory*. The work of Carlos Betancourt seems to have an answer: we can grasp the currents of collective thought through pop art.

For Mr. Betancourt collective memory is sustained through continuous production, contrasts of colors opaque and neon, the

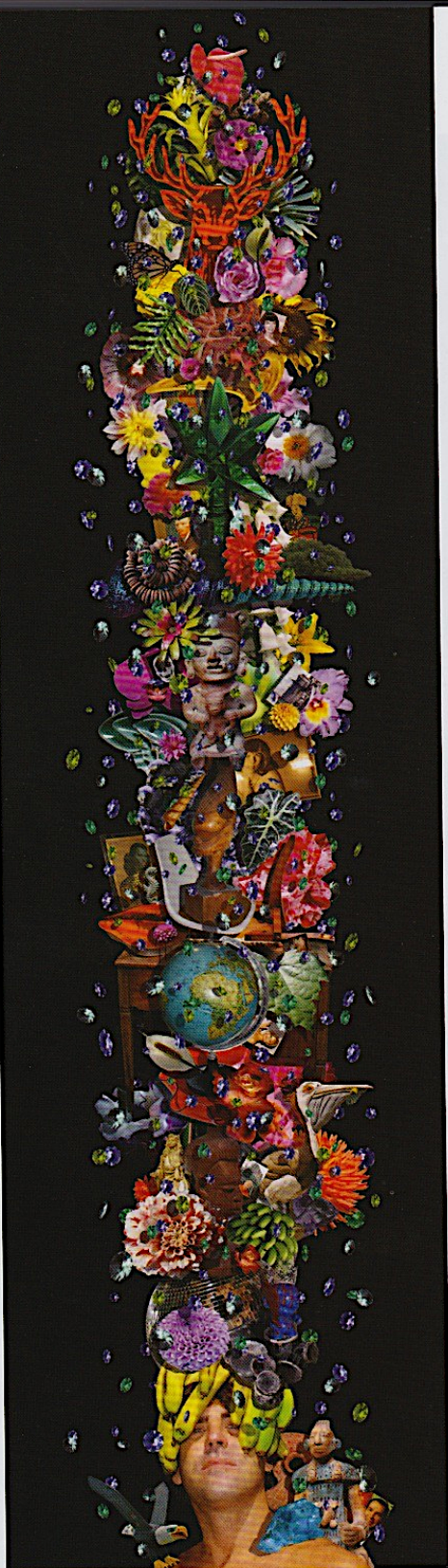
“Cómo recrear las corrientes del pensamiento colectivo que toman su impulso del pasado, cuando sólo podemos captar el presente?”, escribe Maurice Halbwachs en su obra póstuma, *La memoria colectiva*. La obra de Carlos Betancourt parece tener una respuesta: podemos captar las corrientes del pensamiento colectivo a través del arte pop.

Para el señor Betancourt, la memoria colectiva se sustenta en la producción continua, los contrastes de colores opacos y neón, la

*The cut-out Army*, 2006. Print on canvas / Impresión sobre lienzo.  
Courtesy of the artist / Cortesía del artista.







variety of representational forms. Halbwachs helped us understand how the collective memory of a country, for example, is partly created by the monuments it erects. Carlos Betancourt creates a collective memory celebrating the everyday, the provenance and belonging common objects bear. He meticulously collects the objects of his work, most of them of apparent transitory condition: colorful, plastic, kitschy, inflatable.

In *Re-Collections*, Mr. Betancourt shows a never ending collection of shells, cut-outs, photos, flowers conveyed all under one color, as if gleaming under the same sun. We get the sense that each one of these objects have a special meaning; sometimes direct and personal, sometimes subliminal, but always carrying the invading sense of intimacy. For this, he splashes us with vivid images, providing viewers no truce. It is a visual shot of candy flavored adrenaline.

His photography showcases a carousel of carefully threaded patterns made of still life images and portraiture. The images radiate a sense of belonging. The objects he photographs represent a souvenir of the everyday: a disco ball, an old lady, a tropical flower. They provide him with an identity, "(They say) I touched this, I have been here," says Mr. Betancourt. In this process the artist is creator and subject.

A totem represents an entity that watches over a group of people; a family or tribe. In *Totem for Light I* Mr. Betancourt creates an entity that sits atop his proud bust, a totem-head piece made of a collage of images; the individual shaping the whole. The images in the totem are seem random on a first impression, but as the eyes flow from image to image you get a dizzy sense of déjà vu, as if this crowning totem of dahlias, bananas, a flamingo and pre-Columbian figures alongside the Jagermeister deer all have a common thread, all sprayed with the same nostalgia.

In his *Cut Out Army*, Carlos Betancourt displays portraits organized in six rows of sixteen images. Each portrait aims to identify a quality in its subject. The subjects use mix props and poses, no two images are the same, as if underlining that our uniqueness is ultimately what keeps us united as people.

Some of the characters in the portraits wear street clothes, some are nude, most use the props so as to test and challenge conventional thinking: a circular frame as a halo or a woman with a wooden duck on her head, a man with a five o'clock beard in a miniskirt holding a knife. Another character is taking a photograph, as if inviting the spectators to feel part of the show. The *Cut Out Army* is a complex and cleverly organized mix of stories, of people we probably know now or will meet in the future; the near future.

Carlos Betancourt's life has always been surrounded by the ocean and by tropical weather, a significant condition that talks about the type of objects he collects. Born in Puerto Rico, he lived and studied there until the age of 16. Puerto Rico is profoundly active in cultural matters. It has provided the contemporary art world with fine artists (Allora & Calzadilla, Chemi Rosado Seijo, José Bubu Negrón, Inés Aponte, Aarón Salabarrías, Enoc Pérez, among many others).

*Totem for Light I*, 2009. Print on fine art paper, 25 x 90 in. Impresión sobre papel para bellas artes, 63.5 x 228.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist /Cortesía del artista.

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*The (last) Supper / La (última) Cena*, 2008. Print on fine art paper. 120 x 35 in. Impresión sobre papel para bellas artes. 304.8 x 88.9 cm. Courtesy of the artist / Cortesía del artista.

Mr. Betancourt's relation with PR and its culture is very much present in his work. He constantly visits its rainforest and feels a strong tie with the country. This is an ongoing theme that he works on as he alternates his time between Puerto Rico and his studio in South Beach, Miami. Another home facing the ocean. His intrinsic relation with pop culture has given him this sense of celebration portrayed in his work. When pop culture started, it used to be seen as folk culture by the mainstream. As culture moved on it gained a connotation of acceptance and transformed itself into what it is today, an incredible accumulation of thoughts, ideas, images and manifestations that tell us about our everyday life.

The many individual components of his work shine with a light of their own and evidence the artist's need to collect mementos, collect evidence that says "I am here and now". To accomplish this, the collection needs to be in constant flow, celebrating our fluorescently real everyday. In this line, Mr. Betancourt displays certain references to a Jeff Koons aesthetic.

Carlos Betancourt's art seeks to find unique qualities in the ordinary objects of our everyday life. It would seem he operates from a feeling that our collective memory is composed of the nostalgia we impose in random objects. The simple objects, the glimpses, the sighs, the tangible props of our everyday scenario are a treasure we need to preserve. While carrying out the collection of items that make up his personal history, Mr. Betancourt has provided us with a unique bridge to the collective: our personal everyday life.

La vida de Carlos Betancourt siempre ha estado rodeada por el océano y el clima tropical, una condición significativa que habla del tipo de objetos que colecciona. Nacido en Puerto Rico, vivió y estudió allí hasta los dieciséis años. Puerto Rico es profundamente activo en lo que se refiere a cuestiones culturales. Ha brindado al mundo del arte contemporáneo excelentes artistas (Allora & Calzadilla, Chemi Rosado Seijo, José Bubu Negrón, Inés Aponte, Aarón Salabarrías, Enoc Pérez, entre tantos otros).

La relación de Betancourt con Puerto Rico y su cultura se encuentra muy presente en su obra. Visita constantemente su selva tropical y siente un fuerte vínculo con el país. Este es un tema constante en el que trabaja mientras divide su tiempo entre Puerto Rico y su estudio en South Beach, Miami. Otro hogar que mira hacia el océano.

Su relación intrínseca con la cultura pop le ha dado este sentido de celebración representado en su obra. En sus comienzos, la cultura pop solía ser vista como cultura *folk* por la corriente dominante. A medida que la cultura avanzó, adquirió una connotación de aceptación y se transformó en lo que es hoy, una increíble acumulación de pensamientos, ideas, imágenes y manifestaciones que hacen referencia a nuestra vida cotidiana.

Los numerosos componentes individuales de la obra de Betancourt brillan con luz propia y demuestran la necesidad del artista de coleccionar recuerdos, de coleccionar evidencia que diga "Estoy aquí y ahora". Para lograr esto, la colección debe fluir constantemente, celebrando nuestra vida cotidiana fluorescentemente real. En este sentido, Betancourt despliega ciertas referencias a una estética estilo Jeff Koons.

El arte de Carlos Betancourt busca encontrar cualidades únicas en los objetos ordinarios de nuestra vida cotidiana. Pareciera que opera desde un sentimiento de que nuestra memoria colectiva está compuesta por la nostalgia que imponemos sobre objetos elegidos al azar. Los objetos simples, los vistazos, los suspiros, la utilería tangible de nuestro escenario cotidiano, constituyen un tesoro que necesitamos preservar. A la par que desarrolla la colección de ítems que componen su historia personal, Betancourt nos ha ofrecido un puente único hacia lo colectivo: nuestra cotidiana vida personal.





*Re-Collections VII*, 2008. Print on canvas. 50 x 50 in. Impresión sobre lienzo. 127 x 127 cm. Courtesy of the artist / Cortesía del artista.

#### [perfil/profile]



Carlos Betancourt was born and raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico. His artwork is part of public collections such as the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art, the *Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno* in the Canary Islands, the *Museo de Arte Moderno* in Santo Domingo, San Antonio Museum of Art in Texas, the Miami Art Museum, the Bass Museum in Miami Beach, the Lowe Art Museum at the University of Miami, and the Museum of Latin American Art in California. He has been included in multiple solo and group exhibits as well as art fairs such as Art Basel and ARCO. He received the Florida Department of State Millennium Cultural Recognition Award, a National Endowment for the Arts Grant, and the Miami Beach Arts Council Grant. He lives in Miami, Florida since 1981.

Carlos Betancourt nació y se crió en San Juan, Puerto Rico. Su obra está representada en colecciones públicas tales como la Galería Nacional de Retratos del Instituto Smithsonian en Washington, DC, el Museo Metropolitano de Arte de Nueva York, el Museo de Arte de Fort Lauderdale, el Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno en las Islas Canarias, el Museo de Arte Moderno en Santo Domingo, Museo de Arte de San Antonio en Texas, el Miami Art Museum y el Bass Museum en Miami Beach, el Lowe Art Museum en la Universidad de Miami; y el Museo de Arte Latinoamericano en California. Ha participado en numerosas exposiciones colectivas, así como en ferias de arte tales como Art Basel y ARCO. Se hizo acreedor al *Millennium Cultural Recognition Award* otorgado por el Departamento de Estado de Florida, a una beca del Fondo Nacional de las Artes y a otra del Miami Beach Arts Council. Vive y trabaja en Miami, Florida, desde 1981.