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ART

# THE COLLECTED WORK OF CARLOS BETANCOURT

By EMILY MCDERMOTT

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WHAT WARHOL LEARNED FROM ROXANNE LOWIT



THE COLLECTED WORK OF CARLOS BETANCOURT



ROBERTA SMITH & JERRY SALTZ



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ABOVE: CARLOS BETANCOURT WITH *APPROPRIATIONS FROM EL RIO: AS TIME GOES BY* IN MIAMI.

Wooden oars, glass bottles filled with freshwater pearls, a sculpted fish, a white skull, and a silver chalice hang from the ceiling among hundreds of unique objects. This complex installation is suspended above tables, as the focal point of Miami's new restaurant, Seasalt and Pepper. Last week during Art Basel, Puerto Rican artist Carlos Betancourt unveiled his latest work at the restaurant's opening party.

"My work is about the ephemeral and issues of memory. It's ingrained within me," Betancourt explains. "I have physical objects that belong to people, trophies they keep on their shelves because it reminds them of something."

Betancourt's installation hovers above dining tables in the back of the restaurant, which is discreetly nestled along the Miami River. At initial glance, *Appropriations from El Rio: As Times Goes By* draws the eye to the center, but then immediately redirects the focus outward; it demands as well as rejects attention. The oars projecting from a spherical center appear like a frozen explosion.



Although he was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Betancourt moved to Miami at the age of 15 in 1981. He watched as the city grew and dramatically changed. Inspired by the evolving history, his piece reflects current tensions, such as American-Cuban relations, but also pre-Columbian stories like the Tequesta Indians of the Miami River.

"When I moved here it was like a village, but I liked it," Betancourt said. "I've seen [Miami] turn into an urban place, which I enjoy very much and it's great for culture, but sometimes I forget that the beach is right there and the Everglades are on the other side. It's dense."

While a band played Betancourt's favorite music and guests enjoyed Seasalt and Pepper's lobster risotto, octopus tender, and seafood casserole, the artist told us about the installation and his work.

EMILY MCDERMOTT: How do you incorporate both Puerto Rico and the United States in your art?

CARLOS BETANCOURT: It's the twisted mind of an artist. Puerto Rico had a culture of blending and mixing. When the big migration of Puerto Ricans went to New York to find work, the economic opportunities in Puerto Rico were mediocre. They worked really hard, conquered many things and then went back to Puerto Rico with power and American culture. You can find a table in Puerto Rico that may be arts and crafts or a ceramic table. It may have an African sculpture, a plastic flower vase, and a plate by Picasso. To many people it doesn't make sense, but to me it's organic. I explore many issues of blending that are endemic to Puerto Rico and ancient cultures. Instead of running away, you embrace what you are. I think it takes a lot of young artists years to accept where they're from, but that's your gift. If you embrace it and explore it, that's where your message is.

It's the same thing with Miami. Miami has issues of identity and that's beautiful because my work is about mixing and blending. When I came here there was a clash for me about how people were mixed—blacks, whites, Nicaraguans, Cubans—and I think that created a sense of self that I wasn't aware of. Since then all of my work has been all about the ephemeral and issues of memories. I have a little bit of pop influence because I love pop culture, but I crave mystery in my work. I don't like answers. If I think a work is answering too many questions I reject it.

MCDERMOTT: Why do you think you're drawn to memory?

BETANCOURT: I'm a child of the generation of optimism. I grew up with the architecture of the '50s and '60s, but then it was taken away from me with mass-produced architecture and furniture. The optimistic architecture had a big impact on me. I've been working for 20 years as a professional, and I respect the past a lot. I have this thing in my head that I think not everything new is great, not everything old is bad.

MCDERMOTT: Where did you draw the inspiration for this piece in relation to it being placed in a restaurant as opposed to a gallery or museum?

BETANCOURT: I was very lucky. This piece was conceived with my partner Alberto—he's an architect—five years ago. He saw my two-dimensional work and was like, "One day I will do something three-dimensional with this," and then the opportunity came. I was introduced to this restaurant and did a presentation. When you collaborate with a place you usually compromise, but they allowed us to fly with this piece, from the palette to the elements. It was organic. History is one of my passions, so I wanted to bring the history of the [Miami] River that hasn't been explored to the city.

There are oars from Cuban rafters that I used to collect. In the '80s and '90s, rafters used to come from Cuba and you would just find them on the beach. There are elements from the rest of my work, like the crown. It's been part of my art for 10 years. I've worn it, my father has worn it and my mother has worn it. It's a link to the issue of memories. Do you like it?

MCDERMOTT: Yeah. It really draws your attention not just to the specific space, but also makes you look behind you and at the areas the oars are pointing towards. It makes you want to look around.

BETANCOURT: Oh, my God. The third day after I finished, I came and felt like that about it. I think it's a successful piece. When it's a public commission, sometimes you have to compromise, but I didn't have to on this one. I think this piece was always meant to be here. The architect and the owners have embraced it. I had one of my main art patrons come here a few days ago, and they've known my work for 15 years. The words that they used were the ones that were filling.

MCDERMOTT: What were the words that they used?

BETANCOURT: She was like, "Whoa! Let's talk about sophisticated artwork." It was a challenge to work with black, because I hardly ever do, and she pointed that out. She also said how the piece completes the space. I celebrate the architecture of the space, but without the piece, the space wouldn't be fulfilled. You can see it from the river, and many beautiful things happened while I was doing this. I'm very much into intuition. I know how to read the signs.

MCDERMOTT: Do you remember a moment when you were working on this piece that was one of those signs and you were like, "This is it"?

BETANCOURT: Yes. I was listening to a radio station and they played "Moon River," which is my favorite song, by Henry Mancini. *[laughs]* They don't play that on the radio. I was listening to the station and I screamed, "Albert! Albert! Oh my god they're playing 'Moon River!' This is it! We're meant to do this." It was a special moment when they played that. I usually don't work with music. My studio is quiet, but this piece I did with music.

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MCDERMOTT: Is there a reason you've never worked with music before?

BETANCOURT: I like silence, and in urban settings it's very hard to get. This happened organically with the music and I don't know if it will happen again. Writers and artists, we need the silence, we look for that, and Miami has become very urban.

MCDERMOTT: How would you describe your philosophy toward art?

BETANCOURT: I say art is everywhere, anywhere, all the time. You just have to look and see. The source of most great artists is in front of you most of the time. Walter Gropius also said something that I love: "Art is to be part of something that hasn't been created yet." You are absorbing what is coming and can look at it in many ways. I like to say that Damien Hirst knew—like the Mayans and the Aztecs—that we needed a skull again. So did Alexander McQueen. It's the shape of things you feel, not seen. I relate to that a lot and understand it profoundly.

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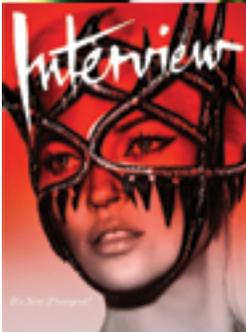
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