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Carlos Betancourt. *Castro in Triumphant Advance to Havana*, 2001. Print on Sintra, 49" high.

## Visual Incantations

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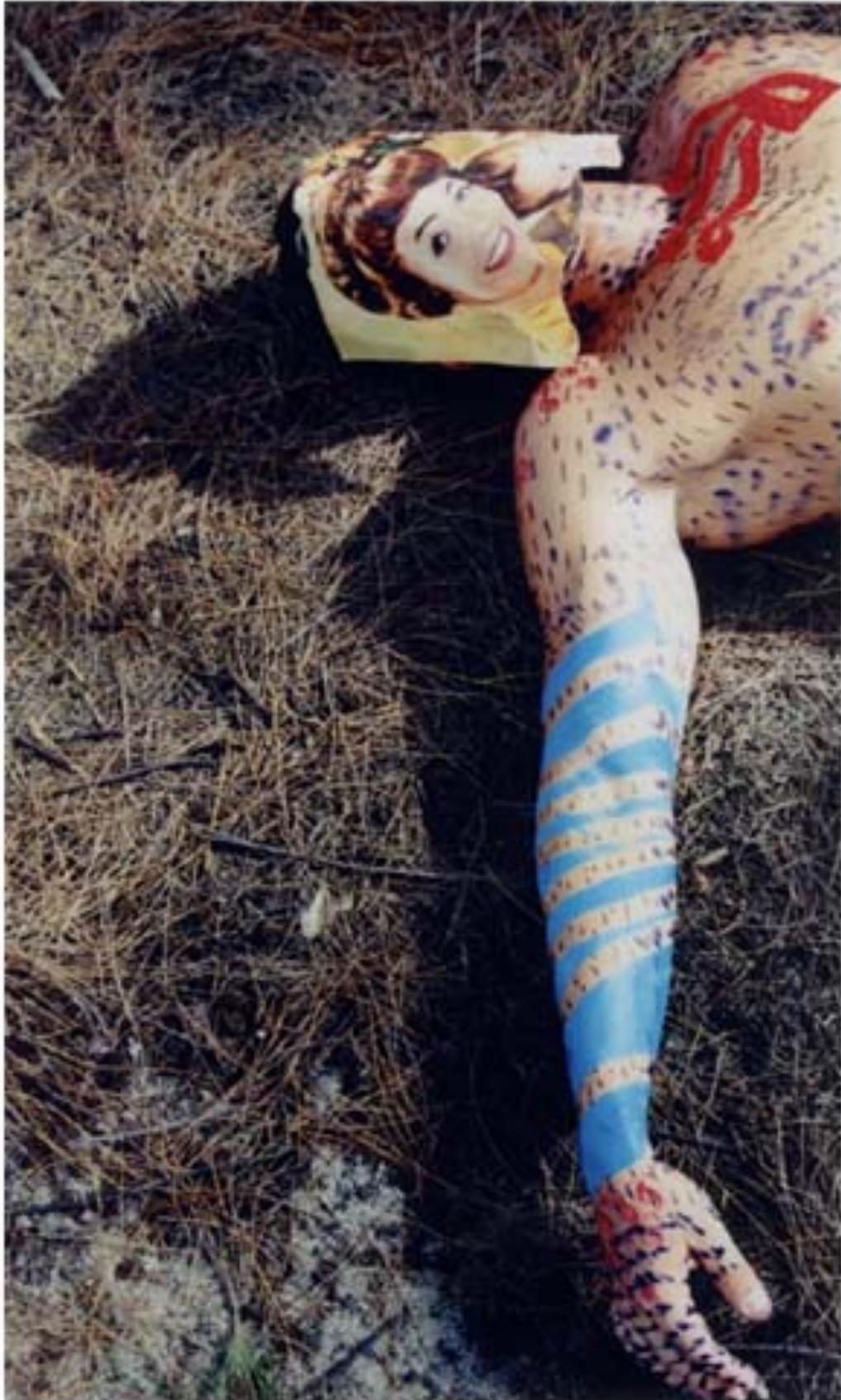
CARLOS BETANCOURT  
Heriand-Cimino Gallery  
New Orleans, Louisiana

ART IS THE ultimate reality because it exists in the dual space of both the imagination and the location. It matters not whether its appearance is representational or nonrepresentational. Art, in all its manifestations, engages the senses; therefore it is real and unavoidable. For that reason, some say Photography is not really Art, it is merely a record of what is already there. But of course we learned creatures know better, a photograph becomes art when the imagery of the moment is rescued from the confusion of the mundane, thus immortalizing a fragment of time.

What prompts such considerations are the large Metallic Lambda Prints and Prints on Sintra of Carlos Betancourt in the front space of Heriand-Cimino Gallery. Initial response to the solitary nudes covered in body paint and markings is uncertainty. Why are these modern folks' bodies painted like a canvas, sometimes, though not quite, looking the part of a tribesman? What is the real subject matter, could it be that our unclothed bodies are vulnerable receptors for external stimuli.

Of course it could be, if the accompanying information about the artist's intent is sincere. We learn that the Miami-based Betancourt, born in Puerto Rico to Cuban parents, is fascinated with his pre-Columbian and Afro-Caribbean heritage, especially the body markings associated with spiritual connections. By coloring the skin with bright, pigmented shapes and dark graffiti, the body becomes less a physical object and more an animation of spirit. A costume of color transforms the ordinary person into a messenger of the gods.

Something a little different actually occurs, however, in Betancourt's color photographs that most often use his body as a support for symbols and color, though in a few a woman's figure is the canvas. Betancourt's interest in physical substance is also an issue, since the photographs are very limited edition, sometimes only an Artist's Proof when the actual printing is on Sintra board. So, we have to approach these staged images in the manner of a painting. The pigment-adorned models are in a transient state, acting as living moments of color and symbol that will pass as soon as the 35mm camera completes the shoot. Betancourt's body contains the same pigmentation throughout the series. The Sintra Print "Apito y Cenizas with Letter to Alberto" is a cropped detail showing the blue-faced artist applying glittery blue to his chest that already



*The vague year, 2001  
metallic lamina print*



Carlos Betancourt. *Worship I*

has an elongated gold symbol. The "Letter" referred to must be the symbol though there is also meandering script across the entire torso. Another Sintra Print is "Think Ahead Love Eye" that shows the artist holding a clump of dirt.

While it is difficult to actually categorize Betancourt's photographs, it is possible to declare that he is driven in a variety of directions. The images of himself are more matter-of-fact and somewhat forced when compared to the Metallic Lamda Prints featuring a female. In these, the artist assumes a dramatic confrontation with the figure as a conduit of color and drama, placing less emphasis on the notion of nude. "The Mockingbird" shows a graffiti-covered woman seated on a bench with a group of plastic lawn carolers behind her. In a Michael Jackson move, one of her forearms has a "glove" of bright blue glitter.

Betancourt's nudes are essential to his photographs, but they are not role-playing characters in the sense of a Cindy Sherman. His figures act as three-dimensional arrangements for, lack of a better term, living color. "The Vague Years," another Metallic Lamda Print, aims directly for the abstract since the emphasis is on a bright yellow magazine page of a vintage woman's face covering that of the reclining male's. His extended arm sports a floating, light blue shape. Somewhat out of context with the colorful exhibit is the very muted "Untitled (Triangles)," in which greater vantage point is afforded a slumped female nude dwarfed by a white quarry. As with all of Betancourt's photographs, this latter piece is taken from a Series.

"Untitled (Triangles)" comes from "The September Series" which must refer to the 9/11 disaster and its removal of life and color. While Betancourt's photographs prompt much consideration on a multiplicity of levels, it is his installation in the second gallery that is especially beguiling and cosmic. Which is saying a lot for a floor centerpiece that amounts to glitter, house wares, and soil. "Installation with Aracoel's Objects" pays homage to the artist's deceased grandmother and harnesses the transitory nature of her life by making a monument of the items she touched, thereby forever holding her spirit. Rather than the occasion of Death being somber, "Installation with Aracoel's Objects" is festive and celebratory in a Surreal way. Set before us on a triangular base of densely packed soil is a litany of her personal things: shoes, hairbrush, plates, silverware, jewelry boxes, and more, ending with her rocker next to a lamp on table. All of the objects are covered in liturgical blue and purple glitter. The lamp is plugged into a wall-outlet, perhaps a reference to the ongoing current of human life and to his grandmother's rite of passage. And so, Betancourt succeeds in making the past forever present. Which is as it is and should be, for we humans are marks upon the earth, unguided and anonymous, unless we bond with primordial spirits. For Betancourt, this means identifying the body with a series of visual incantations, and isolating special objects with elaborate cover. Surely his ancestors are pleased. □