Carlos Betancourt: Re-Collections

Rock, waterfall, and wind, and a figure crouching still--all these of one mind.1

Cheryl Hartup

“Human beings and objects are indeed bound together in a collusion in which the objects take on a certain density, an emotional value - what might be called a ‘presence.’”2

Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*

“The experience of creating art in general can be as simple and as fulfilling as picking up seashells.”

Carlos Betancourt

Return

What would an exhibition of the things you cherish look like? In *Carlos Betancourt: Re-Collections*, the artist recycles the past and celebrates its eternal renewal in the present. Betancourt's subjects are the spiritual aliveness and cross-cultural poetics of people, places, materials and objects. He combines and transforms these elements into modern-day offerings that link the material world and immaterial time, sensation and memory. The artist's mixed media works embody and extend many of the prevalent themes in contemporary art of the last thirty years--the body and nature, the archive and strategies of display, beauty and popular culture, spirituality and identity, memory and history--and some less common subjects like family, and the concept of home.

Betancourt's personal journey--physical, emotional, and intellectual--is the creative force behind his work. Born and raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico, to Cuban parents, he developed a love for wild nature and a passionate interest in the island's Taíno past and Afro-Caribbean culture and traditions. In addition, the way "[p]eople live artistically in Puerto Rico in an unconscious way" deeply impressed him.3 Like the place where he grew up, Betancourt's work is a syncretic layering of information where popular culture clashes against the intensity of the lush tropics. It is fitting that his first retrospective museum exhibition is taking place in San Juan, the city where he first studied painting under Jorge Rechany (1914-1990), and where he bought his first camera, a Canon AE-1, with three years of savings.

From the Enchanted Island, Betancourt's family moved to the Magic City where he continued to study art and embrace the optimism of tropical midcentury architecture. He participated in the initiatives of the Miami Design Preservation League, Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Surrounded Islands* project (1983), and Miami Beach's mainstream and underground art scene in the 1980s and 1990s. Betancourt started his career with the founding of Imperfect Utopia around 1989. In this storefront studio and gallery on Lincoln Road where he lived and worked, he produced mixed media paintings and sculptures, happenings, and furniture. Imperfect Utopia attracted a wide range of visitors and characters from burlesque legend, Frances Smith, and the switchboard operator at the Lincoln Road Hotel, Mary Joe, to Sandra Bernhard, Celia Cruz, Audrey Hepburn, Rudolph Nureyev, Morris Lapidus, Keith Haring, Octavio Paz, Linda Evangelista, and Julian Schnabel, just to name a few. This trans-cultural convergence of inspiring individuals appeared again in Betancourt's sensational line-up of costumed friends and family in *The Cut Out Army* (2006), *The Hedge* (2007) and *The (Last) Supper* (2008). A block from Imperfect Utopia was the main building of ArtCenter/South Florida, founded in 1984. Betancourt became a member of the organization and he formed lasting friendships with many of the resident artists.

One of the most exciting events for the artist was the discovery of The Miami Circle at the mouth of the Miami River. It was a sacred place, believed to be between 1700 and 2000 years old, where one could honor Miami's past. In 1998, after an apartment complex was torn down to make way for a new luxury condominium development, archeologists discovered the remains of a circular structure thirty-eight feet in diameter built by the Tequesta Indians. Tools, human teeth, a dolphin skull and a

complete shark skeleton and turtle shell, among other items, were found at the site. Betancourt's involvement in the excavation of archeological artifacts at The Miami Circle likely influenced the form and concept of his *Sound Symbols* (2000), *Interventions in Nature* series (2001-2002), *Re-Collections* series (2008-2011) and *Untitled (broken objects)* (20014-2015). His artwork is a continuous exploration of what we learn by touching the primordial past in the digital age.

Since the early 1990s, Betancourt has made mixed media works that involve found and collected objects, the body in the landscape, and collaged images. His supports range from canvas, paper and vinyl, to skin, nature and architecture. He works often in bright Caribbean daylight with electric colors. Betancourt creates synchronic relations within and across cultures by commingling the vitalizing forces of body, spirit, nature and object. He activates the known and the unknown in sites of penetrable opacities--the forest, the ocean, petroglyph carvings and bodies covered with mirror writing. He shares the Martinican writer and theoretician, Édouard Glissant's belief that "...the past resides in material objects that only release their hidden meanings when encountered imaginatively and sensuously."4 In Betancourt's work, mass-produced and unique objects, and their related memories, participate in a feast of infinite metamorphosis.

Carlos Betancourt: Re-Collections, is the artist's first one-person museum exhibition of works made from 2001 to 2015. For the most part, this essay follows the order of the artworks on view in the installation at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo. My thoughts about Betancourt's art have been shaped by my experiences of his work in Miami since 2000, our conversations and visits, and several texts we selected including

Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (First Vintage Books Edition, 1984), Jean Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* (1996), Édouard Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (1989) and *Poetics of Relation* (1997) and *Photography Theory* edited by James Elkins (2007).

Interventions in space and time are part of Betancourt's practice and I encouraged him to casually insert personal objects and psychedelic sketches in the galleries to break the formality of the installation. I wanted to give the viewer a feeling for the environment where the artist lives and works and all that inspires him. Because Betancourt activates fragmentation and diversity to counter history as a linear progression, I juxtaposed works from different periods and series to generate new meanings among objects and images. In addition, the artist wanted to exhibit his large-scale prints on vinyl in an entirely new way. He chose to overlap and suspend the works in the museum's inner courtyard, thus evoking photographs drying in a dark room, laundry hanging in the sun, and the popular *libros de cordel,* inexpensive printed booklets of poetry displayed along a cord for sale.

Reunite

Carlos Betancourt: Re-Collections begins with the artist inviting us into the heart of his universe--his home in El Portal, a neighborhood near North Miami. From the moment we enter his world, it is clear he has a passion for knowledge that roams free and makes connections. Through his creative imagination, we are many places at once. In his large color photographs from the *El Portal* series, Betancourt creates a

synthesizing space of interior and exterior, landscape and architecture, rootedness and open vistas, and the dynamic euphoria of travel and the static joys of domestic life.5 He calls upon nature and fully realized signs of the past to exude their sacred essence in a modern, functional environment. His fondness for appropriation and layering of information--ancient artifacts, slick advertising, mid-century design, the spontaneous gestures of graffiti and the body in flight--feed his creative enterprise. Like the collages and assemblages of Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008), he brings together disparate elements from "...the messy and rich condition of contemporary American life…".6

In *El Portal II*, memory is triggered not only by the smells and tastes of food, but also by family snapshots and mementos. Objects that appear here take on new life in other works. For instance, a carved wooden African head floating at the top of the photograph once belonged to Alberto Latorre, who is seen eating in the kitchen, and his family. This sculpture was particularly significant to the Latorre's because it was the only cultural object that Alberto Latorre's father acquired during his foreign military service. For Betancourt, the article represented is as important as the actual thing, and it is necessary to transform objects so they can create new meanings. Betancourt asked permission of Latorre to paint the African head turquoise blue and he featured it prominently in *Shopping Cart Atomic*. Thus, among the inexpensive, mass-produced kitsch items in the cart are unique handmade sculptures that are family treasures. Betancourt, like Jean Baudrillard in *The System of Objects*, suggests that consumption is an abstract relationship, a manipulation of signs.7 As Baudrillard concludes at the end of his cultural critique of the commodity in consumer society, "So what is consummated and consumed is never the object but the relationship itself, signified yet absent,

simultaneously included and excluded; it is the *idea of the relationship* that is consumed in the series of objects that displays it."8

The merging of architecture and design, nature and objects in the *El Portal* color photograph series is given three-dimensional form in the baroque assemblages of *Portrait of a Garden.* Constructed in collaboration with architect Alberto Latorre, this series of columns, painted Klein international blue, are twenty-first century fanciful and impractical garden folly decorations. As Betancourt describes, they were inspired during a trip to Los Angeles when "I noticed a nursery and garden shop. The salesman had displayed many faux columns at random, each with an irrelevant faux sculpture on top...I thought it was very "Lapidus," as in architect Morris Lapidus, who was a friend from the Imperfect Utopia days."9 Lapidus' extravagant and delightfully mad architecture of the Fontainebleau and Eden Roc hotels, Miami's diverse design styles, and the many oddities the artist sees displayed in the front yards of homes in Puerto Rico, have influenced Betancourt's free-spirited forms that mix high and low culture.10

In the first gallery of *Carlos Betancourt: Re-Collections*, in addition to works from the *El Portal* and *Portrait of a Garden* series, are items the artist selected from his cabinets of curiosities and his extensive archives of Miami's culture scene dating back to the 1980s.11 These memory theaters, located next to his library, studio and computer, accompany Betancourt during the thinking and creating process. For *Carlos Betancourt: Re-Collections*, the artist intuitively selected dozens of objects that have marked his history and he displayed them like a personal time capsule, a kind of self-portrait. The ephemera and mementos from all stages of his life include a plastic daisy clock from his childhood, newspaper obituaries, African sculpture and Maasai jewelry,

vintage postcards and Interview magazines, Haitian beaded bottles, a place setting from Miami's Fontainebleau hotel, a Huichol beaded skull, and his grandmother's cloth doll. In his mixed media works, cabinets of curiosities and archives, Betancourt builds sites where the collective experience finds articulation.

Respond

The earliest works in *Carlos Betancourt: Re-Collections* date from 2001, when Betancourt began making performative and documentary photographic images that probe the naked vulnerability of life and death. He covered his body, and the bodies of others, with historical texts written backwards and forwards, stylized signs, indigenous symbols and bright powdery pigments and glitter. Then he photographed the figure in nature, focusing on the head, torso, and hands. Betancourt printed the images in two formats--color photographs on light sensitive paper and large vinyls, as big as fourteen feet by twenty feet. Viewers have described the latter work as cinema screens, advertising banners, and paintings.

The first image Betancourt printed on vinyl was *Self Portrait with Letter to Bartolomé de las Casas* where he wrote illegible passages from Bartolomé de las Casas' *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1552) on his body. In this text, the sixteenth-century Spanish historian and Dominican friar denounced the atrocities committed by the European colonists against the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean and the Americas.12 Betancourt photographed his face upside down, eyes open, and his tongue sticking out to communicate perhaps that he does not accept the world as it

looks and he does not want photography to manage or tame a difficult experience.13 Like de las Casas living amidst the Native Americans, we bring our own history to *Self Portrait with Letter to Bartolomé de las Casas*. We may feel both an authority over the image and alienation from the print on vinyl.14 Betancourt's photographic works are a sign of his investment in the sending of a message of relation to the past, present, and future. Their dynamic production transcends their immobility and silence.15

Self Portrait with Letter to Bartolomé de las Casas conflates ideas about death, strength, and ancestors in Kongo culture. As Robert Farris Thompson explains in *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, these three concepts are present in the inversion of vessels on graves in many Kongo and Afro-American cemeteries. "Indeed, the verb 'to be upside down' in Ki-Kongo also means 'to die.' Moreover, inversion signifies perdurance, as a visual pun on the superior strength of the ancestors, for the root of *bikinda*, 'to be upside down, to be in the realm of the ancestors, to die' is *kinda*, 'to be strong,' 'because those who are upside down, who die, are strongest.'"16

Betancourt made *Self Portrait with Letter to Bartolomé de las Casas* in response to the haunting painting, *We Have to Dream in Blue* (1986), by Arnaldo Roche Rabell (b. 1955). Rabell's self-portrait features a face covered with the dark, decomposing floor of the forest, which appears to be both soft and prickly. He has piercing blue eyes, and sealed lips. Both artists present themselves as sites of solitude and solidarity, remembering and forgetting, where the complexity of personal and collective experiences converge. The artistic expressions of Betancourt and Rabell are a means

for comprehending and transcending the powers that periodically threaten to dissolve a people.

Receive

Betancourt tempers the weight of history with the forces of ancestor spirits, new life, light, color, and mystery. These energies pulsate through the body and flow through the hands like blood coursing through the veins. For *Apito and Ashes with Letter to Alberto*, Betancourt placed a mound of earth on his chest and above it is a large glittering yellow and blue sign inspired by the Hopi. The artist looks to his left hand which holds his grandmother's ashes. For Glissant and Betancourt, relation is spoken multilingually, and the ability for language diasporas to endure involves "the shimmer of variety," "fluid equilibrium" and "linguistic sparkle" not monolingual prejudice.17 *What are the Names of your Brothers Caracaracol?* shows a pregnant woman holding her womb. This may be the Taíno goddess Itiba Cahubaba who died while giving birth to quadruplets. She was able to name her firstborn Deminán Caracaracol, before she passed away, but the other three brothers remained unnamed. In *Interventions at Hobe Sound Alberto and Cucubano*, a figure cradles flaming orange blossoms and a bright white flower. Perhaps this is Deminán Caracaracol holding the secret of fire which he and his brothers stole from their grandfather, Bayamanaco. The luminous green glyph on his chest is the color of the light emitted by the cucubano, a species of click beetle native to Puerto Rico.

In *A Ceiba in the River*, we see neither a silk-cotton tree, nor a river, however, the artist's hand and arm, close to the earth, evokes the two elements metaphorically.

The purple pigment in his palm, and his fingers, suggests soil and roots, and the arrows drawn on his arm, pointing upward, convey a strong current. Centuries ago, Puerto Rico's indigenous peoples considered the ceiba tree to be sacred and they continue to be national landmarks. In the history of art on the island, many artists have represented this subject, perhaps the most famous being Francisco Oller's *The Ponce Silk-Cotton Tree* (ca. 1887-88). In Betancourt's work, the ground is "littered" with broken objects--a ceramic vessel, plastic toys, a small wicker chair. The image seems to ask, where do we find redemption in our own detritus? But what looks like debris, is in fact Afro-Cuban Santería offerings at a sacred site.

Betancourt's engagement with universal spiritual practices activates his cultural roots. *Interventions with Aracoel's Objects* features the personal items of his grandmother. ("Aracoel" is the Taíno word for grandmother.) The installation and the photographic and video documentation of the artist's performance among these objects, are an homage to "Aracoel's" character and a sign of honor and respect.18 The installation combines traditions and beliefs from Kongo, Kongo-American and Yoruba culture. In *Flash of the Spirit,* Thompson states that "...Kongo and Kongo-American tombs are frequently covered *with the last objects touched or used by the deceased*…" in order to safely ground the spirit.19 Furthermore, things that glitter and sparkle, like a falling star or tin foil, intimate the flash of the departed spirit, as well as attract the spirit.20 Arranged on a raft of earth, these domestic objects could be floating in a mythical underworld river.

In his first chapter on Yoruba culture, Thompson discusses how mystic coolness (*itutu*), symbolically represented by the color blue or indigo, is a revered character trait.

It signifies someone who lives "...generously and discreetly, exhibiting grace under pressure…[and] confidence to cope with all kinds of situations."21 Betancourt covered his grandmother's objects with blue glitter, "...the color of heaven, the color evil can't cross…" to empower them.22 Included among these domestic items is a flat, rounded, stylized indigenous glyph. This object relates to *Sound Symbols,* a three-hundred-foot-long temporary public art installation that Betancourt made, in collaboration with Alberto Latorre and fifty volunteers, on Miami Beach in 2000. Betancourt and his team fabricated and painted 2,500 wooden symbols, mostly African and Taino, and placed them in the sand. Together they made one symbol that read best from the sky.

For his works titled *Hood on the Hood*, Betancourt conducted a series of interventions in Miami's Wynwood neighborhood at the height of its dramatic transformation from a sketchy no man's land to an upscale cultural district in 2003. His choice of objects for his color photographs and installations--skateboards, tennis shoes, a gun, a black hooded sweat jacket, a graffiti-covered bench--relate to youth street culture, and are tinged by the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin in 2012. In *Hood on the Hood Tennis Shoes I Installation*, Betancourt covered the tennis shoes, skateboard and gun that hang on a line, like an electrical wire crossing a street, with red glitter. Whereas blue signals correct character in Yoruba culture, red communicates potentiality, a vital force, and the "power-to-make-things-happen." It signals something intense and extraordinary, here, now.

Retrace

After Betancourt moved to Miami in 1981, he continued to visit Puerto Rico regularly, and since 1998, he has produced work annually on the island, sometimes at the same sites where, as a boy, he vacationed with his family. In 2005, he rented the same beach house in Rincón where the family would stay during the summer. They hadn't been there in over thirty years. While staying at the vacation rental, Betancourt produced a series of color photographs called the *Rincón Flamboyant Series*. The works read like campy mise-en-scènes with sexual and religious overtones. Tobias has caught a magical fish, and he may need to use its power to drive out his own demons. St. Sebastian, tied to a palm tree, is covered with red Maltese Cruz flowers instead of arrows. Rather than gazing heavenward, his head is down, his eyes are closed, and he appears to be under a spell cast by the Houdini at his side.

Family Portrait is the first artwork to feature Betancourt, his parents, and his partner Alberto Latorre. Local fruits, flowers, green vegetation, food, drink, and shells are irresistible subjects for the artist, and he adorns or accessorizes his figures excessively with the bounties of Puerto Rico's land and seas like still-life offerings to the viewer, as well as to the gods. Although family members are together, each one is lost in his or her own revery, hiding behind sunglasses, fans, snorkeling goggles and masks. In this individual and collective creative daring, Betancourt's masked figures, like Glissant, believe in "...the importance of this plunge into primordial chaos as a means of both confronting self and interacting with the community."23

Many of Betancourt's favorite memories as a youth in Puerto Rico occurred during his adventures in nature, and he regularly reconnects with the power and beauty of the island's oceans, rain forest and Taíno sacred sites. In *Untitled (Guabancex by Río*

Blanco) and *Petroglyphs and Surfer Shorts in Río Blanco* the body becomes a modern-day petroglyph alongside the ancient carvings. In *Top of the Three Pointer in Río Blanco*, the shape of the figure approximates that of the rock and they both become Taíno *cemís,* symbolic representations of a god, spirit or ancestor. Like the artist Ana Mendieta (1948-1985), who impressed her body literally and figuratively upon the landscape to recreate a sense of belonging, nature is an extension of the body in Betancourt's work.

In *Vejigante in Río Blanco*, Betancourt gathers disperse sticks into a bundle and ties them to the front of his subject's head, thus suggesting the Vejigante's demonic sharp teeth and copious horns. With this creative approach, the artist links nature and culture, a vital combination for the formation of a collective consciousness. In *Untitled (Guabancex by Río Blanco),* Betancourt melds his crouched body into an indentation in a rock next to a petroglyph of the goddess of the wind. Mendieta carved her own representations of this deity, and several other Taíno goddesses, into the limestone walls of two caves at Las Escaleras de Jaruco, a national park outside Havana, Cuba.24 Betancourt and Mendieta search out stubborn shadows that allow for the exploration of one's ancestral past, to counteract total dislocation and depersonalization.25

In *Poetics of Relation* Glissant urges that a "...passion for the land where one lives is...an action we must endlessly risk."26 In *Sunday Afternoon in El Yunque,* the Greek-shaped vase in the foreground suggests that we have arrived at Puerto Rico's Mount Olympus and the temple of the god of abundant vegetation and intoxicatingly fragrant flowers. Betancourt's combination of figure and tropical fruit, in this image, as

well as in *Family Portrait*, inserts these works into Puerto Rico's visual history. The presence of these "exotic" yet typical delights of the land extends from the eighteenth-century portrait paintings of José Campeche, to Francisco Oller's nineteenth-century still lifes, to Ramón Frade's iconic early twentieth-century *jíbaro* (peasant), to the present. Betancourt treats these stereotypical, yet iconic elements, like a bunch of plantains, as proud symbols of national culture, rather than as socio-political critique. His dazzling use of accumulation, expansion, and the power of history, combined with his command of composition, color and shape, imbues the work with an arresting presence.

The camera's perspective moves from one of adoration on a mountain top to a bird's eye view of a small clearing in the forest. In *The Enchanted Forest*, a female nude seated on a bench holding bright red heliconias and surrounded by lush green vegetation exudes the wonder of discovering a rare metallic longhorn beetle in the duff. Both the tamed and the untamed inhabit this place of becoming. From masked baroque irreverence in his *Rincón Flamboyant Series* to naked inward transcendence in the El Yunque rain forest, Betancourt's primordial exuberant language is a conscious expression of Caribbeanness.

The artist's approach to art always engages the senses before it centers in the mind. His explorations of the utopian yearnings of our time merge the body with sacred space and the sights, sounds, smells, touch and tastes of nature. *Hand-print* honors Betancourt's practice that engages touch, slow time, circular motion, and starting from a center that moves outward. *Back Stories at Hobe Sound Q* shows a red bromeliad coming out of the artist's mouth like a Mesoamerican speech scroll. Betancourt becomes a modern-day Nezahualcoyotl (1402-1472), ancient Mexico's greatest lyric

poet, reciting one of his flower songs, perhaps seeking a favor from the gods or giving thanks. In contrast, *Vieques,* a photograph of a figure contemplating a coconut, is a more enigmatic image. Is this the island's patroness wearing a towel to protect herself from radiation, a metaphor for our silent, empty response to morbid unreason, or, just the opposite, our ability to study what we typically chose to ignore?

Like a surrealist photo-collage, *Castro in Triumphant Advance to Havana* is a curious condensation of visual pleasure and mental exercise. In Betancourt's work, art resides in the object itself, as well as the meanings we embed in it. The print on vinyl is a composite image of a large eye--a detail Betancourt tore from a magazine advertisement--and a female nude covered with the sacred signs of Cuban Abakuá, called *anaforuana*, as well as invented signs, symbols, and illegible words drawn by the artist. The title of the work comes from the cover of the January 19, 1959, issue of Life magazine, from which Betancourt removed his found object--the eye.

Castro in Triumphant Advance to Havana generates discussions about photography's multiplicity and adaptability. What does this work tell us when we explore it as an object, a practice, its function? How does photography operate ideologically, politically, and psychologically in society? Siegfried Kracauer, a German writer and cultural critic, believed that photography had a potentially revolutionary role. As the masses are bombarded with photography's accumulated emptiness, a process of disenchantment and change would begin. As he wrote in 1927, "In the illustrated magazines, people see the very world that the illustrated magazines prevent them from perceiving."27 The open eye from the advertisement and the closed eyes of the figure suggest also Walter Benjamin's idea of the "optical unconscious" where things are

visible “...to the camera eye and the unconscious eye but invisible to the waking eye...” which he purported in his 1931 essay “A Little History of Photography.”28 Perhaps Betancourt’s large eye suggests that “...seeing is not the same as being critically conscious of what one sees.”29

Recreate

Andy Warhol (1928-1987) said he was not a “creator” of art, but a “re-creator,” and both Warhol and Betancourt are “re-creators” of popular culture. Whereas Warhol erased differences between high and low art with his intensions, Betancourt blurs distinctions between the two by mixing mass-produced kitsch, functional products, and original, handmade articles with fresh improvisation. In works like *Cakes Atomic* (made with the assistance of architect Alberto Latorre) and *Shopping Cart Atomic*, Betancourt seeks out the unique, the folkloric, the exotic, and the antique, and he arranges objects in uncanny and ludic ways. He selects items for their secrets, mysteries, and maximal meanings, real or suggested. As Baudrillard states in *The System of Objects*, these types of material things “...answer to other kinds of demands such as witness, memory, nostalgia or escapism*...*They are a way of escaping from everyday life, and no escape is more radical than escape in time, none so thoroughgoing as escape into one’s own childhood.”30

Betancourt, like Andy Warhol, examines the intriguing synergy between art and appropriation, materialism and narcissism, consumerism and self-expression. His *Shopping Cart Atomic* and *Cakes Atomic* question the meaning of freedom and

individualism, and the roles of gratification and repression in our consumer society. The titles of the works, their ball-and-stick molecular model details, and drips, suggestive of chemical sludge, allude to the Atomic Age.31 This period, known for its optimism and anxiety and peace through annihilation, adds another layer of paradox to the art. Is *Shopping Cart Atomic* an example of the aphorism of artist Barbara Kruger (b. 1945) in her work, *UNTITLED (I SHOP THEREFORE I AM)*, from 1987? Are creativity and self-expression indistinguishable from buying things? Do we lose or gain our sense of self with our objects? Although Betancourt is ever the optimist, his sculptures remain ambiguous because they appear to simultaneously criticize and celebrate their provocative themes.

As a counterpoint to *Shopping Cart Atomic* and *Cakes Atomic*, *After September (Untitled, Red Face)* also embodies the intense dichotomies of empowerment and fear. This large, striking vinyl of a woman pulsates affliction and a formidable supreme presence. Her skin is covered with a network of black and blue frenetic lines and geometric shapes, and a layer of red sand which signifies the giving and taking of life. For Betancourt, red "...is the color of blood, energy, desire, war, power. It is a very emotionally charged color and anything with emotion is alive."32 This work is part of a series Betancourt produced in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. In every image a figure is covered with or partially immersed in sand, which evokes the deadening silence of ash-covered bodies. *After September (Untitled, Red Face)* is particularly haunting, and hopeful perhaps, because it is the only face in the series that returns the gaze of the spectator.

Reflect

The act of re-collecting started very early for Betancourt. During his youth, his family moved quite often, and among the few belongings they took with them each time were photo albums. Because of this, he has always valued snapshots as generators of memory. Betancourt missed the objects he grew up with, and, as a young adult, he went in search of the mass-produced items he saw in the family photographs, like glass Christmas tree ornaments. Whenever he found something that he remembered from his childhood for sale, he acquired it.

For his *Re-Collections* series, which he conceived of in El Yunque, he created a clip-art collection of personal photographs and possessions, and he used the small pictures to make intricate collages. The earliest *Re-Collections* are dynamic explosions--or implosions--of friends, family, objects, flowers, and shells. They embody the pleasures of memory and the joys of relation. Each image seems to be linked to a particular experience, place, or moment in time. Betancourt's later *Re-Collections* are symmetrical designs, reminiscent of kaleidoscopes, full of light and multiple reflections. In these works, objects appear to have been selected for their shape and texture, however, every item holds a special significance for Betancourt, like material culture at an archeological site. As we saw in his *El Portal* series, Betancourt is moved by the clash of urban life against the backdrop of nature, and collage is a way for him to re-examine and organize the world around him and to solve the composition of an artwork.

Amulet for Light presents eight golden staffs that have the power to protect one from evil and danger, as the title of the work suggests. For each totem, Betancourt

fused images of silver heirlooms in a friend's collection with photographs of organic items and his own decorative objects and artifacts, and then he created a mirror effect. *The Jungle* (1943), a painting by Cuban artist Wifredo Lam (1902-1982) inspired this work. Lam's fantastical human-animal figures that merge with dense, sugarcane vegetation honor his Chinese and Afro-Cuban ancestry and transculturation. Likewise, Betancourt's hybrid spiritual intercessors embrace multi-dimensionality. The reflective surfaces of the amulets suggest an integration of object and observer and underscore Baudrillard's statement in *The System of Objects*, "For what you really collect is always yourself."33 In Betancourt's art, every subject is an object, and every object is a subject.

Gold is another important color for the artist, like blue and red. When he uses it, as in *Amulet for Light*, it communicates power, status, luxury, wealth, prestige, and the sun. In *Assemblages of Things Past III (After Alberto's First Shelves)*, Betancourt used gold paint to transform and elevate a modest chandelier and inexpensive wall decorations. These "trivial," "tasteless" ornaments could be found in the homes of working-class Americans, the subjects of artist Duane Hanson (1925-1996). Betancourt's choice of objects and color express a sympathy for the human condition. Like Hanson, he is interested in reconnecting art with the overlooked in everyday life. Here, gold communicates beauty, value, endurance, warmth and a rare preciousness. The square patches of gold tiles, streaked textured surfaces, and drips like stalagmites at the bottom of the painted wood panel reference duration and the passage of time.

Release

Betancourt's most recent series of photographs, *Untitled (broken objects)*, presents images of objects falling and shattering on top of one another, one at a time. Intermittently, the artist poured different colors of paint over the layers of fractured and crushed shards. In these bursts of fragmented particles, Betancourt multiplies the energy, power, and memories embedded in the objects, and transforms them into layers of brightly colored pigments, like those he applied to the body in 2001. As Betancourt disassembles things and puts them back together in new ways, he shows us how photography can recycle the past and present it as a cohesive present.

In the Pleasant Sand and *Interventions in Nature Series, VI Blanco,* communicate, once again, the importance of relation through presence and absence, inscription and erasure. A field of small uniform sand castles and a color photograph of the shifting the edge of the sea are pregnant sites where every periphery becomes a center. In *Interventions in Nature Series, VI (Blanco)*, we see three moments in time that seem to play continuously, like a film loop. The figure in the surf is poet Richard Blanco, a long-time friend of the artist and Alberto Latorre.34 In this mutual mutation of ocean and body, knowledge of one's inner and outer ecologies comes from remembering and forgetting. As the past, written on Blanco's body, dissolves in the sea, he is left with the trace of a new sensual, spiritual and healing experience. The breaking waves give him memories on the outer edge of space and time.

With *In the Pleasant Sand*, an ephemeral installation, Betancourt, like Glissant, suggests that "[k]nowledge lies in walking away from these complacent mental spaces and plunging into the vortex of ritual."35 Like *Untitled (broken objects)*, the artist gives expression to the transgression of delimitations. The sandcastles will go through a cycle

of composition, decomposition, and recomposition. Will we demand our right to be freely moving and disturbing the pleasant sand and not a passive observer on the sidelines? Will we clamor to crush its homogeneous nature and leave our unique imprint in a burst of unity? *Untitled (broken objects)*, *In the Pleasant Sand* and *Interventions in Nature Series, VI (Blanco)* communicate ideas of fragility and malleability, the individual and the collective, consistency and change, gathering and scattering, reinvention and renewal. These concepts are relevant to Betancourt's life, art, the places he travels to regularly, like the Greek Isles, and the places he calls home--San Juan and Miami. He respects and embraces all that surrounds him, and as objects, bodies, and thoughts collide, he shapes new understandings that transcend their specific localities.

The life/art of Carlos Betancourt is an organic flow of fleeting relations that cycle back and reverberate over time. He confronts the self, and, simultaneously, seeks out global interconnections. Like the intimate and brutally honest art of Tracey Emin (b. 1963), that transforms a private feeling into a sublime expression of human emotion, Betancourt's work also expands from the personal to the universal. He is not afraid to title his work *Of Things Past How Much I Love You*. This sculpture dripping deep blue, is both rooted and open, a relic pulled from the ocean, from history. As Betancourt explores the past and the present, art, memory, relation, material culture, nature, and ancient principles in a zone of convergence, we look for our own deep renewable energy sources that can last forever, like the sea.

Endnotes

1. The title of this piece of writing was inspired by Marsden Hartley's poem *Return of the Native* on page three of *Selected Poems Marsden Hartley*, edited and introduced by Henry W. Wells, and published by The Viking Press in New York in October 1945.
2. Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict, rev. ed. (Brooklyn: Verso, 2005), 14.
3. "Carlos Betancourt Q and A," interview with Brandi Reddick, unpublished document.
4. Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. and ed. J. Michael Dash, 3rd ed. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), xxxv.
5. Baudrillard, *The System of Objects,* 71.
6. Charles Wylie, "Robert Rauchenberg, Skyway" in *Dallas Museum of Art: A Guide to the Collection* (Hong Kong: C & C Offset Printing Co., Ltd., 1997), 280.
7. Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 217-218.
8. Ibid., 219.
9. Paul Laster, "Interview with Carlos Betancourt," in *Carlos Betancourt: Imperfect Utopia*, ed. Petra Mason (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2015), 70.
10. "Carlos Betancourt Q and A," interview with Brandi Reddick, unpublished document.
11. My natural reaction to Betancourt's archive was to ask who is building research capacity for the history of art in Puerto Rico? Where are these archives located, and how can they serve our creative imagination?

12. Bartolomé de las Casas later advocated for the importation of African slaves to compensate for the decreasing native population.

13. James Elkins, ed., *Photography Theory*, New Ed ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 19. These ideas are discussed by Susan Sontag in her essay “In Plato’s Cave” in her book *On Photography* published in 1977.

14. Ibid., 32-33. These ideas are discussed by Victor Burgin in his essay “Photography, Phantasy, Function” in *Thinking Photography* edited by Burgin and published in 1982.

15. Ibid., 29. These ideas are discussed by Allan Sekula in his essay “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning” in his book *Photography against the grain: essays and photo works, 1973-1983* published in 1984.

16. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 142.

17. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 19, 98.

18. Antonio Zaya curated the first presentation of *Interventions with Aracoel’s Objects* which took place at El Nuevo Chorro Bar Restaurant in Loiza, Puerto Rico. The installation and Betancourt’s performance were part of *Puerto Rico en Ruta 2002*, organized by mm proyectos. Don Uva assisted the artist in Loiza, and he appears in a few of the photographs and video scenes.

19. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, 134.

20. Ibid., 124, 142.

21. Ibid., 16.

22. Robert Farris Thompson, “On the Artwork of Carlos Betancourt,” in *Carlos Betancourt: Imperfect Utopia*, ed. Petra Mason (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2015), 140. Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, xliii.

23. Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, xliii.

24. Mendieta made ten carvings of various Taíno goddesses in 1981, and she photographed them in 1982, with the intention of publishing a book of photo etchings titled *Rupestrian Sculptures Series*.

25. Betancourt has produced several works in honor of Ana Mendieta. In 1995, he painted her portrait as part of his “*En la arena sabrosa*” series, and in 2001, he made five prints on vinyl for his “Interventions in Nature III Series By Mendieta’s Ceiba.” In these works he features his own body with text and symbols written on it, and he holds various blossoms and a nest in his hands. “Mendieta’s ceiba” is at the Cuban Memorial Park in Little Havana. In 1980, she created *Ceiba Fetish* by applying hair collected from a neighborhood barber shop to the trunk of a large sacred ceiba tree in the park.

26. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 151.

27. Elkins, *Photography Theory*, 9. This is a quote by Siegfried Kracauer in his essay “Photography” in his book *The Mass Ornament* published in English in 1995.

28. Ibid., 13.

29. Ibid., 9. This is a quote by Siegfried Kracauer in his essay “Photography” in his book *The Mass Ornament* published in English in 1995.

30. Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 85. At the age of six, a family vacation to Walt Disney World in Orlando and visits to the Fontainebleau and Eden Roc hotels on Miami Beach made an unforgettable impression on Betancourt.

31. Betancourt used to produce furniture which he sold at Imperfect Utopia, his Miami Beach gallery, and some of his designs featured ball-and-stick details like molecular models.

32. Paul Laster, “Interview with Carlos Betancourt” in *Carlos Betancourt: Imperfect Utopia*, 70.

33. Baudrillard, *The System of Objects,* 97.

34. For a discussion of Richard Blanco’s friendship with Carlos Betancourt see Richard Blanco, “Memory As Truth,” in *Carlos Betancourt: Imperfect Utopia*, ed. Petra Mason (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2015), 7-11.

35. Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, xliii.