



"About the sensual archeology"
84"w x 36h Mixed on canvas

CARLOS BETANCOURT



"Guabancex" 1999
50"h x 60"w.
Mixed media on canvas



"Jatibonicu" (orocouix) 1999
Mixed media on canvas

Timba the Medicine

The Art of Carlos Betancourt

Carlos Betancourt comes from the sea of the creoles, the Caribbean, cradle of mambo, timba, and merengue, cradle of Lam and Mendieta and Bedia. The Caribbean method means to play remorselessly with the kinship of languages, mixing and bending, establishing meanings that cut many ways.

The Caribbean was a school of being for Carlos Betancourt. Here he acquired the taste for fine blending, in visual transmissions that are accurate and compelling. The more he mixes, the more you feel his mind.

It is said that the two largest bundles of neurons in the brain cluster in readiness for commands from the tongue and the hand. Speech and tool-making emerged in the work of the tongue and the hand. It is almost as if our paleolithic ancestors were celebrating the acquisition of words, plus the ability to hold and to make things, when, at the dawn of the image, they started painting on rock outlines of hands, and cut out of bone, and cut out of stone, man's first set of tools.

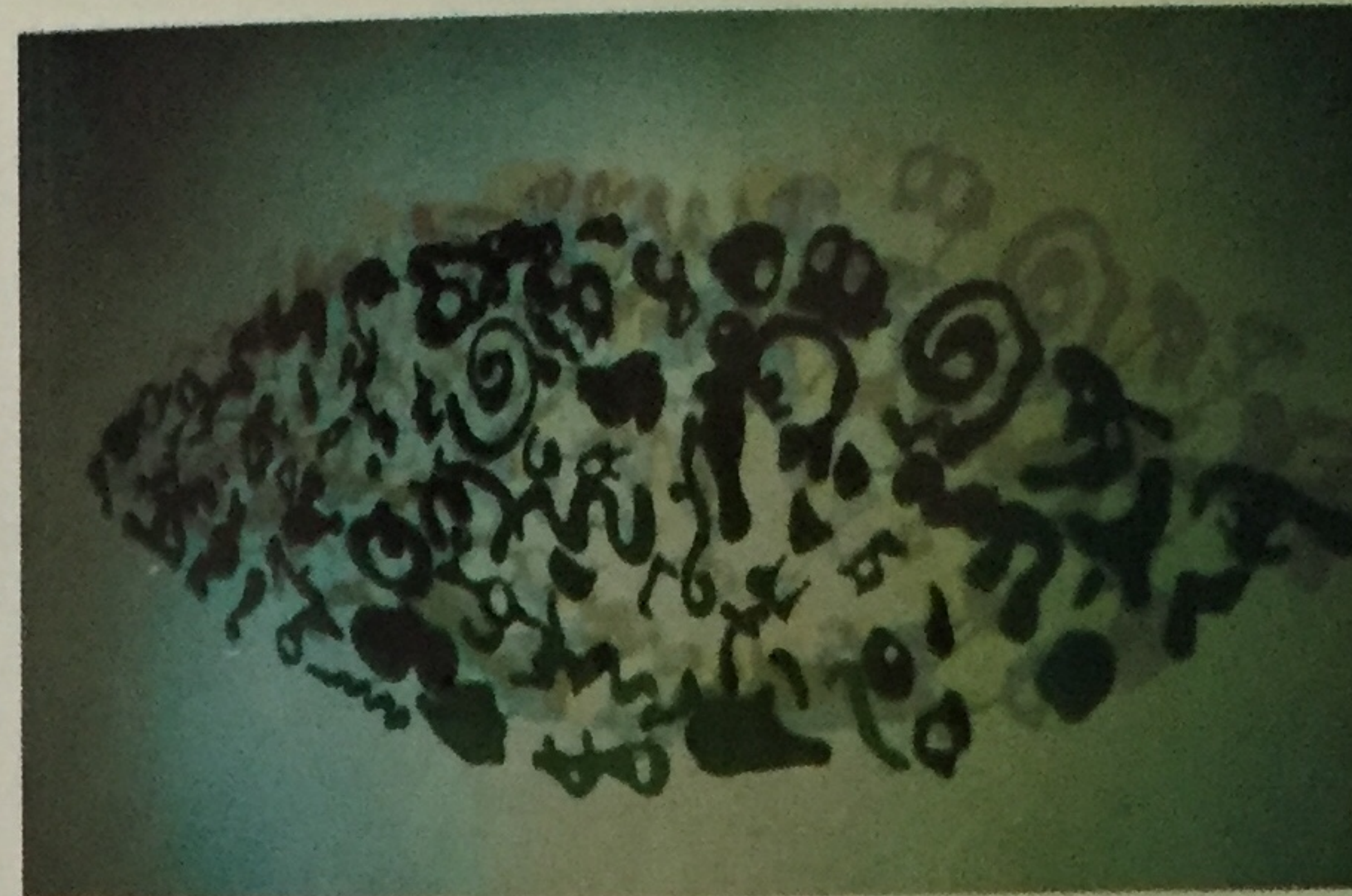
Betancourt resumes this celebration. His art is an amazing mix of primordial and contemporary. And the primordial, as the late and great Keith Haring reminds us, always makes us new.

Start in medias res with a recent elegant mixed-media painting of hands, signs and color. The hands preside at left, right and bottom center. These signs of presence surround a triangular area packed with signs carefully selected from Akan, Taino and other traditionalist sources. The triangular outline distantly cites a three-point Taino object used to summon the ancestors. Repeated white circles seal in the buzz of signs. These icons of invocation are placed on a hushed field of mauve. Betancourt, speaking and drawing his own personal creole, lives in the mixture of three or more languages. He brings off a painting that mixes delicate mauves with things quite intense. He honors the cacique of his dreams and consciousness but does so unpretentiously. For there is a smile behind the learning, a sharing of hours, pouring over handbooks on Drakensberg rock art and Akan adinkra and goldweights.

In one of his strongest works, a panoply of hands photographed in different places in this hemisphere-Teotihuacán, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Miami-there is a vague reminiscence of the site art of the seventies. But the play of the fingers is different with each hand, miming their sign-making powers. But they are not merely gesturing, caught in the act of signing and communicating. They also sense shapes set behind them, feeling with fingertips hardness, softness, reading in braille the places where once they were photographed and poised. So the ultimate code, in Betancourt hand imagery, is touch.

Betancourt culminates this painting with three hands in red, the "supreme presence of color", as Lévi-Strauss put it in a memorable passage in La Pensée Sauvage. These hands take their power from paleolithic ochres. Perhaps this is Betancourt's way of saying that he didn't invent the outlined hand as presiding icon, they did, the rock artists of the Drakensberg, The rock artist of the Franco-Cantabrian. But under their tutelage he took visual council,

to signal to the future that we, too, were alive in the 20th century. Betancourt, consistently primordial, also works with spirals, unfurling within them myriad little symbols, as "formulae of life". Once, when he painted a wavy frieze of signs, and silhouetted them against a neon-like background, pulsing light blue, it was as if he had cut into coaxial cable, to study the flow of the ongoing images



"About the temporal and universal substance" 1998.
32" h. x 84" w. x 4" d.
Wall assemblage, Mixed media.

the way Soutine close-studied meats on the racks in Paris. Put another way, Betancourt, like many key artists, is trying to make sense of imagery-overload at the end of the 20th century. Putting the pieces together in caboclo-like fusions of Amerind and African, he dreams a dream of ultimate translation, going beyond transmission of words and into the realm of pleasure, the realm of the shout and the moan.

A shout-economy governs his superb photo prints on back-lit paper, works from an aluminum light box. Now the signs are single, single bursts of visual noise, resting on primordial stone. The more he economizes, the more he intuits original contexts of rock gongs and yodels, the art history of ecstasy, ritual fusions with the faunal, the floral and the mineral.

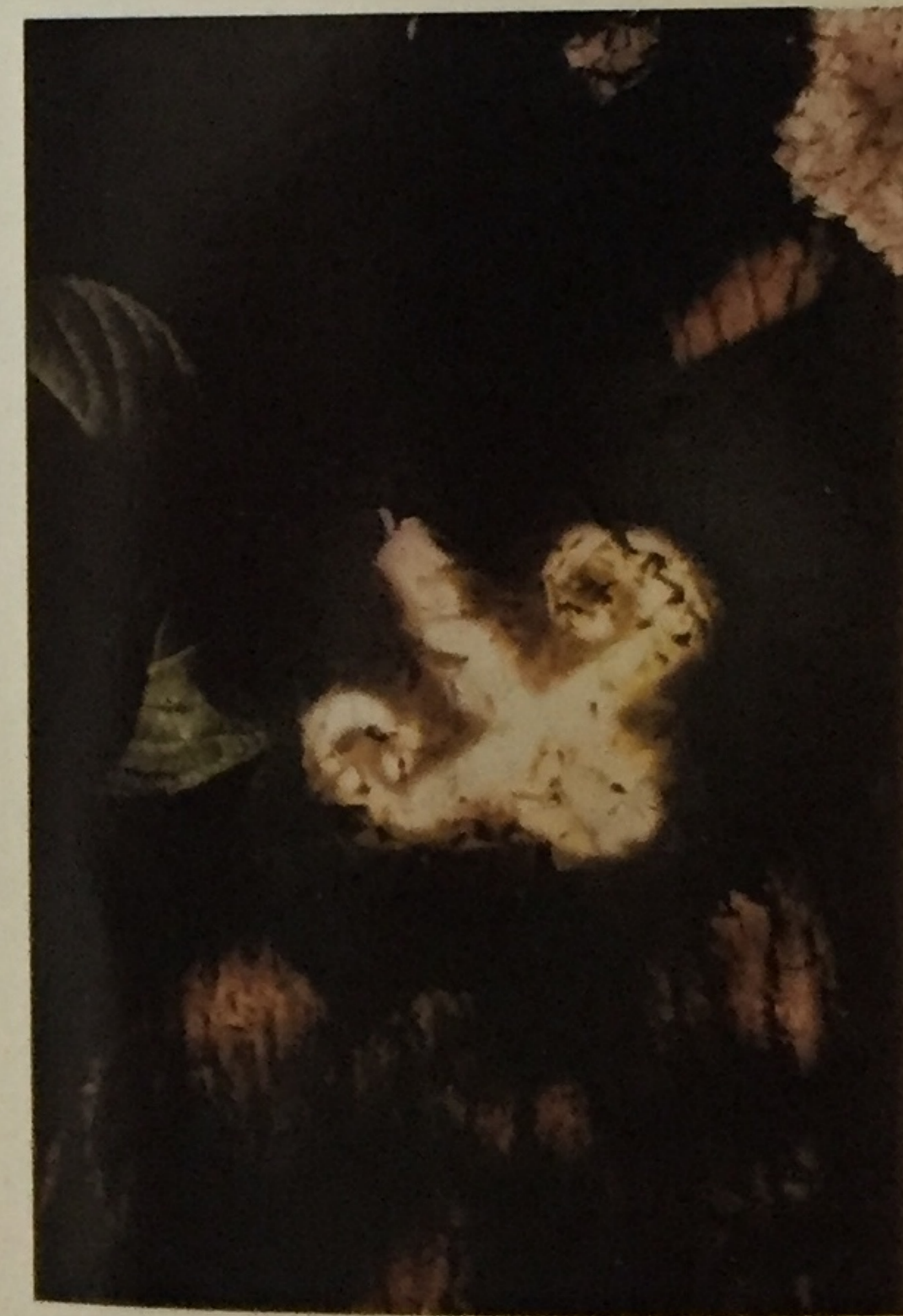
Canvas turns stone, co-presences turn water or shadow. For instance, Betancourt light-projects one of his favorite self-elaborated emblems, a sign with a split bottom and a curved top, onto a stone covered with dark moss, resting by water. He paints that sign with light on the dark texture of the moss. Sign becomes shout. Meanwhile, the framing is Chinese in sobriety. The artist takes just the right amount of water, reading in its blueness as sky, and balances that against just the right sampling of stone.

In another strong work, again from the light box series, the split-bottom-curved-top sign rests on a rock and turns luminously red. Meanwhile backgrounds vanish in the inkiest of shadows. The excerpt of rock is set against silence and emptiness in the two upper corners, in spiritual affinity with the compositional genius of the Southern Sung masters.

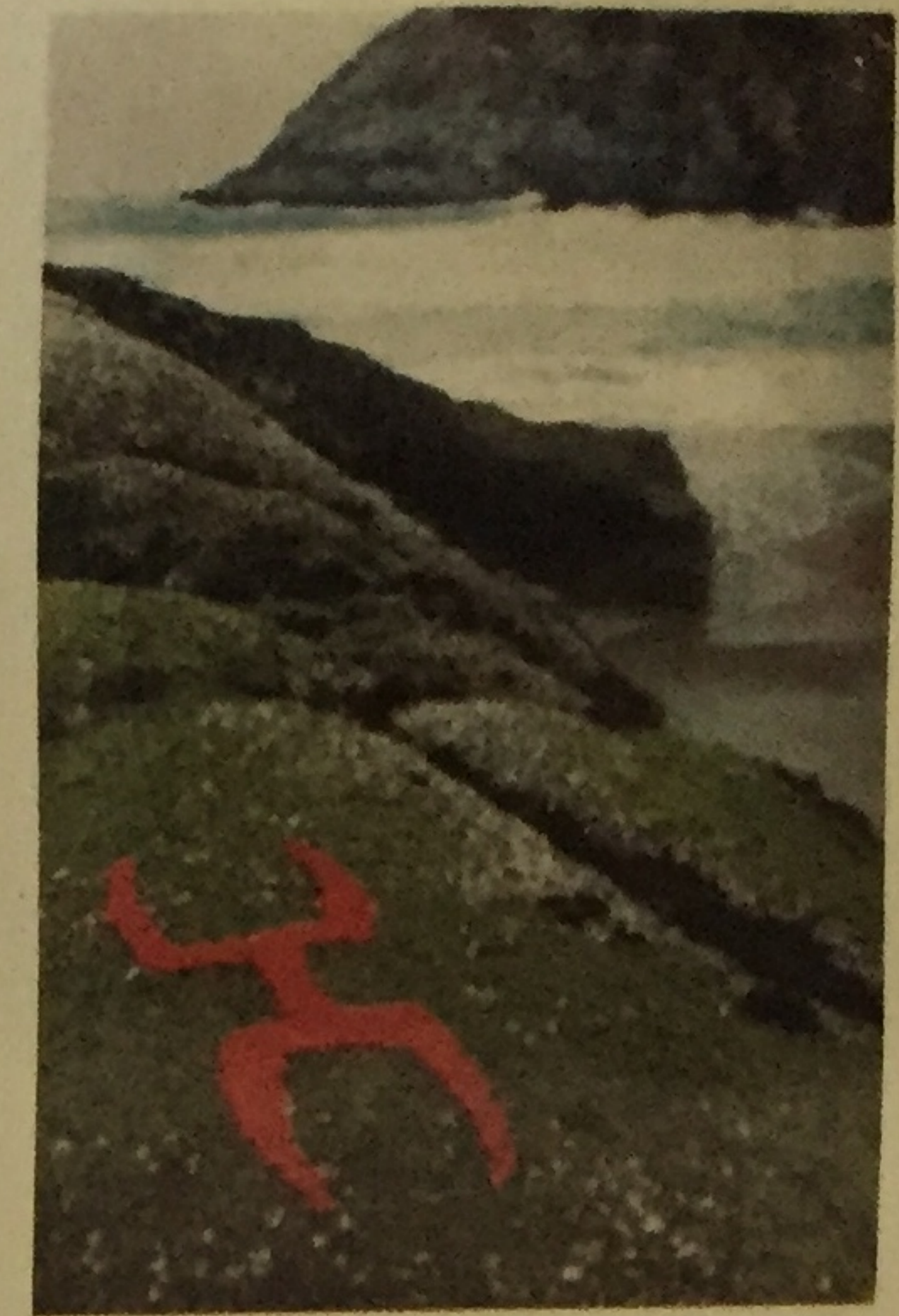
Betancourt is clearly haunted by Ana Mendieta. (There are traces of Bedia, as well). But where Mendieta's earthworks were grounded in palo gunpowder, fire and concavity, he lives by other sources, San and Akan, especially an Akan motif, in the form of a fern, aya, meaning "I trust in God, I fear no man".

And this is the power Betancourt once light-projected on a certain leaf. The sign of a fern becomes a medicine to our fears. At this point his art swerves into two African directions, one obviously Akan, the other less obviously in the direction of the Ejagham current in Atlantic art history. For the Ejagham, like the Mbuti of the Ituri Forest, are famous for writing on leaves (an art picked up by the neighbors of the Ejagham on the Tikar Plain in Cameroon). Ejagham and Ejagham-influenced artists also enclose graphic signs in leaf-like cartouches, with flowing stems to carry the eye from one point of meaning to another.

In Flash of the Spirit I illustrate a calabash incised by an Ejagham-influenced Ibibio artist at Ekeya, near the mouth of the Cross River, where one can clearly see leaf after leaf enclosing a galaxy of sparking signs of love and admiration. Writing on leaves came to the Caribbean and continued in Cuba.



"Yerbabuena" (California) 1999
36"h x 24"w x 4"d. c-print on aluminum light box
constructed photography light project series



"Maidu" (Devils Slide, California) 1999
36"h x 24"w x 4"d c-print on aluminum light box
constructed photography

And up it pops in the art of Betancourt. In this composition the stem divides the photo print in two. A leaf shoots sideways, into the right hand corner. Outlined by framing, we notice at once the leaf has become a slate, una pizarra de la selva. On that "forest blackboard" Betancourt rewrites the maxim, "I trust in God, I fear no one", like a mantra for us all, as we go into the maelstrom of the millenium.

by Robert Farris Thompson



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