

Florida Artist Series 2002

CARLOS BETANCOURT
RECENT PHOTOGRAPHIC WORK

August 8 – September 8, 2002



Carlos Betancourt, *Apito y Cenizas with Letter to Alberto. My Grandmother's Ashes*, 2001, C-print on vinyl; 84x72³/₄"

A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you the less you know. Diane Arbus

Carlos Betancourt's monumental C-prints on vinyl resonate mysteriously across the soaring expanses of the Lowe's gallery. Exquisite in color and clarity, none has been digitally manipulated and all were photographed in natural light. Betancourt likes to make use of what he calls the "traditional ways of photographing, while using advanced technology in printing material." Works from 2001, selected by the artist at the Lowe's invitation, record his continuing photographic exploration of the potent relationship between signs and symbols derived from pre-Columbian and Afro-Caribbean cultures, arcane and contemporary texts, and the human body they adorn and animate.

Betancourt credits his subconscious with informing his art. On a conscious level, however, it is his fascination with markings and myths related to early indigenous Caribbean peoples, especially the Taino, who welcomed Columbus to the New World in the 15th century, which has long lain at its heart. His *oeuvre* is closely associated with what he terms "a sort of contemporized graffiti," some decipherable, some not, some plumbed from tribal sources, some of his own invention, some written forward, most written in reverse. Their multi-ethnic significance has been the focal point of several critiques, perhaps none better than that by art historian, Robert Ferris Thompson, who deftly identified the rich panoply of Betancourt's anthropological references and influences for articles written in 1999 and 2000.

The prints at the Lowe, shot in Guatemala, Cuba, California, Puerto Rico, and Florida are anticipated in Betancourt's earlier work. They progress from the artist's original placement of African, pre-Columbian, and Native American symbols on the traditional mediums of paper and canvas, to elaborations utilizing landscape, and later still, to symbols and calligraphic fragments upon the human body. Given the gradual development of human form in Betancourt's iconography since 1998, the year he expanded his repertoire to include the figure, one might say that the work has, quite literally, evolved. Indeed, at the Lowe, the body is more fully realized/revealed than ever before, challenging for primacy of attention the symbolic drawings and inscriptions, which were formerly/formally the central focus of Betancourt's work.

The transposing of flesh into the artistic *terra firma/tabula rasa* upon which to imprint messages, transcends facile interpretation. The physical manifestation of markings on human anatomy suggests ritualistic scarification and tattooing related to tribal concepts of beautification and protection; their intimations of indelibility evoke and trigger memory; while textually, they weave originally composed prose with ancient translations drawn from specific mythologies. As others have pointed out, Betancourt's carefully constructed compositions are vehicles for communication. But they are communiqués that can never be fully comprehended by anyone but the artist, so

heavily imbedded are they with private meaning. Many are homages to family and friends present and ancestors past; others are metaphorical musings about personal identity. In their imposing size and intrinsic beauty, all are accessible, if not decipherable.

Betancourt crosses an artistic threshold into full-blown painterly expression in the work at the Lowe through the device of chromatic intensity, which blurs distinctions between art created with a camera and art created with a paintbrush. Betancourt moved into color photography slowly, but once he embraced the medium, his images became increasingly saturated. In this regard he reflects a current global trend toward large-format, color drenched, detail rich photography, despite his personal rejection of the con-

cept of globalization in art and his abhorrence of becoming part of what he terms "a global equation."

Primarily, Betancourt wields a Fauvist palette of brilliant primaries and complemen-

taries -- lush blues and greens, fiery oranges and yellows, stunning fuscias -- that dazzles the eye and enriches the viewing experience. These vivid hues, like the graphic elements in Betancourt's art, serve to confuse perception, abstracting the representational forms they define. Consider *Apito y Cenizas with Letter to Alberto* and *The Worshipping of My Ancestors*, in which the planes of Betancourt's



Carlos Betancourt, *Untitled (For Bob and Tibet)*, 2001, C-print on vinyl; 75x144"

head and upper torso are simultaneously flattened and enlivened by vivid pigment; or *Ojos Nuevos*, whose three-dimensional compositional elements are essentially reduced to pla-

nar color shapes. In *Two Sides or Guabancex with Jagua*, the flat, dark umber shadow that obliterates forms creates an abstractly commanding presence that dominates the image.

In Betancourt's hands, color can also play a transformational role, conveying organic and inorganic oneness, rather than distinction. Thus, hand, frond, dirt, and glitter in *Untitled (For Bob and Tibet)*, flesh, leaf, pigment, and paper in *Ojos Nuevos*, and forearm, pigment, and artifacts in *Untitled (Iroko Tree Ritualistic Artifacts)* transcend their individual identities in a fusion of man and matter. Reconciling the animate and inanimate, Betancourt suffuses both blooms and figure in the same sunny glow in *Yellow Blossom by Mendieta's Ceiba*. He pushes this concept to a syntheist extreme in *Oubao-Moin (Isla de Sangre)*, washing figure and landscape alike with cool blues and greens, until the languishing figure dissolves, chameleon-like, into his natural surrounds.

The artist reserves subtler color for compositions that include female subjects, but he achieves the same unifying end. Employing muted, earth-toned palettes he connects women, literally and mythically, to the source of growing things, whereby they lose their mortality and merge organically with their terrestrial environment. In *Two Sides or Guabancex with Jagua*, a monochromatic palette does not distinguish flesh from bark, and the young woman in *Iguanaboina (La Cueva Pintada)* is almost invisible within the encompassing space. Protected and absorbed by the neutral camouflage of her natural habitat, the curving symmetry and pale pink hues

of her breast and abdomen blend seamlessly into the columnar shapes of a pallid, primordial forest. Potent in fecundity, if not palette, she is of particular iconographic significance to Betancourt as a living manifestation of *Itiba Cahubaba*, the mother of the four twins of Taino creation mythology, who are responsible for the birth of the oceans and fish, as well as man on earth.

Gesture is another element of Betancourt's work that can be fraught with import, particularly as a conveyance of gender and sexuality -- and in Betancourt's art, as in nature, not just bravura color, but bravura gesture is reserved for males of the species. Witness the artist's baroque grasp in *Intervention in a Delightful Setting-Guada*, or his dramatic preening, like a cobalt peacock, as he exultantly scatters the ashes of his grandmother, in *The Worshipping of My Ancestors*. Compare this vitality to the serenity of Ana, transformed into a swollen, archaic fertility goddess, in *The Executors... and Iguanaboina*. Arms demurely at her sides, adorned in the delicate backwards script of a letter to her expected twins, her femininity is passively informed, just as the subject's masculinity is dynamically informed.

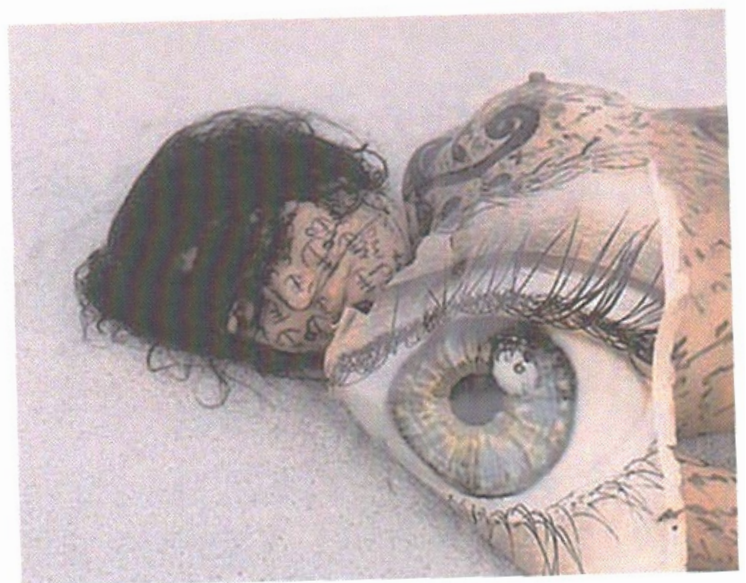
Comparison between *Untitled (Intersection)* and *Untitled (From the Series - Castro...)* further reveals sexually-charged undercurrents relating to yin/yang concepts of submission and resistance, placidity and vigor. Although in both works Betancourt portrays the relationship between figure and seashore, he compositionally energizes *Intersection* with

dramatically foaming shoreline and churning waves, which physically assault a prone, male subject. Almost as a pendant to this image, but composed to opposite, if equally compelling, effect is *From the Series...* in which the resistless demeanor of an apparently senseless woman is mimicked by the inertia of a blank stretch of sand and a staring, surrealistic eye.

Tropical milieux, photographed to romantic perfection and alluding to realms imagined rather than known, dreamed rather than experienced, usually form the seductive backdrops against which Betancourt pursues his full range of artistic interests. He projects a sense of paradisiacal enchantment by dusting, sprinkling, scattering, smudging, and painting his subjects and the spaces they occupy with tactile substances, both organic and inorganic, which assume a magical quality through his lens. In fact, for Betancourt, each element is loaded with special significance: glitter substitutes for falling stars of African myths (*Oubao-Moin; Apito y Cenizas with Letter to Alberto*); soil refers to ancient burials (*My Grandmother's Ashes; Two Sides of Guabancex, with Jagua*); funerary ashes are ancestral (*My Grandmother's Ashes; The Worshipping of My Ancestors*); pigment serves as a vehicle of transmutation. This is the stuff of tribal fetishes, of potent accretions wielded by shamans and medicine men. It is a world Betancourt celebrates, intuitively knows and appropriates, so as to imbue and infuse his art with the magical power and spiritual essence of the African, Afro-Caribbean, and Taino cultures he so admires.

Finally, there is the ambiguous relationship between the images. Betancourt first introduced large-format color photography with a self-portrait at Miami's Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, but he soon began to portray lovers and friends. Viewing the actions and gestures of the figures, one after the other at the Lowe, offers an almost filmic experience, a psychologically charged drama-of-sorts, that unfolds from frame to frame. Intimating a flow of interdependent experiences, the images hint tantalizingly at a subtle dialogue between characters, despite the fact that none engages the other directly. Floating in gallery space, they speak to a seamless whole, artistic intention notwithstanding.

Denise M. Gerson
Associate Director for Curatorial Affairs



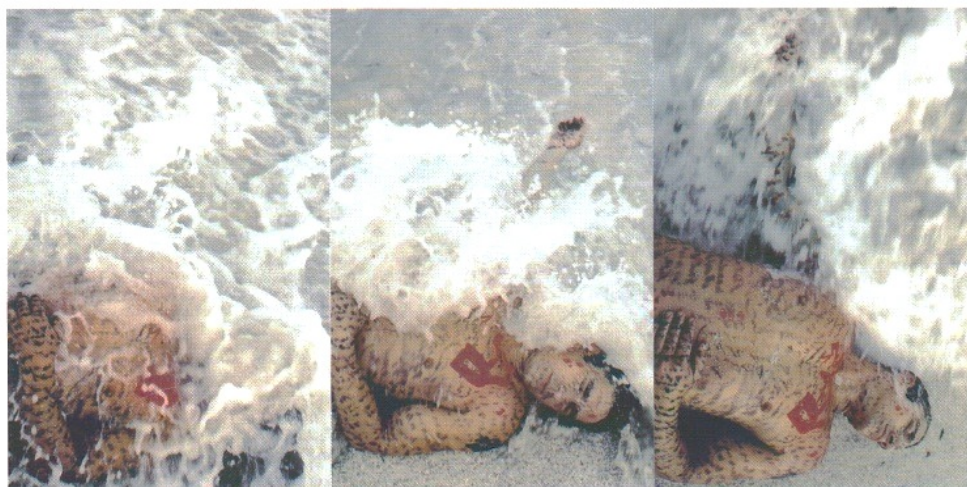
Untitled (From the Series - Castro in Triumphant Advance into Havana), detail, 2001, C-print on vinyl; 132 x 156³/₄"

Biography

Carlos Betancourt, b. Puerto Rico, 1966

Born and raised in Puerto Rico of Cuban parents, Carlos Betancourt studied painting under Jorge Rechany, from the age of ten to fourteen. In 1981 he moved to Miami, where he studied art and architecture at Miami-Dade Community College and went on to receive his Associate of Science Degree at the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale in 1987, with a concentration in industrial design and art history. Throughout his studies, Betancourt worked in various architectural firms and eventually, as a freelancer, designed restaurants and clubs on Miami Beach. He also produced furniture and sold the patent and copyright for a successful chair design that went to the Milano Furniture Fair. Betancourt later opened Imperfect Utopia, a Miami Beach studio/gallery/hangout, where he worked on furniture, architecture, installations, photography, performance, and many other artistic mediums. Betancourt is probably best known for *The Sounds, Symbols Project*, a monumental installation he erected on the sands of Miami Beach for twenty-four hours on the eve of the vernal equinox in the year 2000. Recently, a prestigious commission was awarded to him by Miami-Dade's Art in Public Places Trust for the creation of a major installation at Miami International Airport, to be located within one of the Automated People Mover stations. Carlos Betancourt has received numerous awards and grants, such as the Florida Department of State Millennium Cultural Recognition Award, a National Endowment for the Arts grant, and the Miami Beach Arts Council Grant. He has exhibited extensively in Miami and throughout the world representing the United States in the 2001 Biennial in Santo Domingo. Carlos Betancourt's work is part of such prominent collections as the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Lowe Art Museum. The artist currently lives in Miami, Florida.

Lisa Li
Curatorial Assistant



Carlos Betancourt, *Untitled (Intersection)*, 2001, C-print on vinyl; 72x144"



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Lowe Art Museum exhibitions and programs are sponsored in part by The State of Florida, Division of Cultural Affairs and the Florida Arts Council; and with the support of the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs, The Cultural Affairs Council, the Mayor and the Miami-Dade County Board of County Commissioners.

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