

This essential notion is a cornerstone in Carlos Betancourt's proposal. Even when his oeuvre is inhabited by the most controversial characters, impressive for their richness and diversity, all of them inhabited by the most controversial characters, impressive for their richness and diversity, all of them are located at the same level, always positioned in the human condition. The Cut-Out Army (2006) is an are located at the same level, always positioned in the human condition. The Cut-Out Army (2006) is an are located at the same level, always positioned in the human condition. First of all, and from a nominal point of view, the title imposes different obvious exponent of the one hand, there is a reference to the technical production process of the work, in semantic levels. On the one hand, there is a reference to the technical production process of the work, in semantic levels. On the one hand, there is a reference to the technical production process of the work, in semantic levels. On the one hand, there is a reference to the me to a new, different composition non-which the artist cut out the characters in order to fully integrate them to a new, different composition non-which the artist cut out the characters in order to fully integrate them to a new, different composition non-which the artist cut out the characters in order to fully integrate them to a new, different composition non-which the artist cut out the characters in order to fully integrate them to a new, different composition non-which the artist cut out the characters in order to fully integrate them to a new, different composition non-which the artist cut out the characters in order to fully integrate them to a new, different composition non-which the artist cut out the characters in order to fully integrate them to a new, different composition non-which the artist cut out the characters in the human continuous cut of the work in the integration of the cut out agent to a new, different composition non-which the different composition non-which th

The Cut-Out Army compiles an amazing collection of characters, arranged symmetrically on a black background, as a very organized sequence. Each of the characters engaged in such a capricious procession, looks straight to the camera, challenging the viewer, confronting the viewer openly. Paradoxically, none of them seems aware of the other people surrounding them. So outgoing and uninhibited, these archetypes reveal to us their real selves, their most intimate fantasies and desires, integrating the most outstanding eccentric collection. The (Last) Supper (2008) is a kind of compendium and at the same time is a paradigmatic creation within the production of this artist. The magnificent glicee print is a clin d'oeil to Leonardo da Vinci's famous mural. It is not the first time that Betancourt makes fair use of the common cultural legacy that the Renaissance conveys. Obsessed with the exploration into the human being through the identity, the artist uses this common repertoire to introduce to us new topics.

The main idea featuring in *The (Last) Supper* remains the offering. But now the characters themselves seem to embody the idea of gift, exposing them as the best offering. All of them carry elements and/or stereotypes, generally associated with the Caribbean culture. We can barely separate them from each other, because they all appear to be juxtaposed in an overwhelming cross-symbiosis. Knowing Betancourt's interest for the Caribbean identity, the work immediately brings to our minds the passage narrated by Columbus on his trip diary where the Admiral described how the Tainos, which in Arawak language means good people, approached the conquerors with their hands full of offerings. Both sides exchanged presents as a symbol of friendship. This alleged peace pact sealed by the offering, however, lasted a very short time which in the work of Betancourt is reaffirmed by the title of the artwork that refers to the moment when Jesus tells his Apostles that one of them will betray him. The *Re-Collections* series (2008) is closely related to the above-mentioned works. The series shares the idea of cut-out. The elements conforming the series are extracted from its original context and extrapolated, being re-inserted in a new cosmogony. We attend to the stereotypical idea about The Caribbean: colorful flowers, exotic shells, exuberant nature, sensual bodies.

From a formal language point of view, prevails a sort of horror vacui. No space is neglected. However dominating, the composition's global harmony returns a quiet state of mind to the spectator. The preference for the accumulation, the bright colors, the glossy surface, the exaggeration, and sometimes the grotesque, ties Betancourt's production with the tradition of the American pop culture and kitsch. These influences



Re-Collections VI, print on canvas, 48" x 48", 2008

become one of the main pumps feeding Carlos Betancourt's artwork, which is always in a close relationship with the urban culture.

Carlos Betancourt's characters bring to mind the oeuvre of American artists such as Duane Hanson and Jeff Koons. At the conceptual level, however, the names of artists such as Ana Mendieta, Jose Bedia and Arnaldo Roche Rabel prevail. The Re-Collections series is a plethora of quotations and juxtapositions discoursing about personal and regional identities. Two essential sociocultural reasons are associated with it the Transculturation phenomenon and the Trans-Caribbean identity:

"... the term 'Transculturation' best expresses the different phases of the transitive process from one culture to another, because this entails not only the acquisition of a different culture, which is strictly speaking what the Anglo-American term 'acculturation' means, but the process also necessarily implies the loss or uprooting of a preceding culture. The union of cultures occurs similarly to the genetic coupling of individuals: the child always has something of each progenitor, but is also always different from each of them." ²

The Transculturation appears then as the survival instinct that defines the most authentic Caribbean culture. Associated with this complex process, is the Cultural Cimarronaje, where anything is re-built and readapted to our own beliefs and identity. Hard to translate into English, the Spanish word cimarrón refers to the escaped slave who refused to submit either physically or culturally to the slavery institution. Hidden away in the mountains, they kept alive the African roots and, for the others still in captivity, the illusion of freedom. The Cultural Cimarronaje refers subsequently to the active spirit that looks forward to resist any cultural domination, struggling to maintain even in the most adverse circumstances the roots of the culture-of-origin. This is the spirit that animates Carlos Betancourt's artistic proposal which deals with antipodes such as identity and otherness, acculturation and transculturation, colonization and cultural survival. The human body becomes the appropriated territory for this speech: original altar and final refuge. It would seem that the body in the work of Carlos Betancourt turns into island: islands populated with all the influences that the sea brings to them. That is the Caribbean.

From time to time the artist engages in a sort of re-writing process. Appropriating body surfaces, sometimes his body, Betancourt gives back to us testimonies of our inner being. The body is offered as a receptacle of traditions, memories, fears and desires now revealed to us. Curiously, in this new palimpsest, the writing is often inverted, which is somehow evidence of a surrepititious but essential nuance behind the whole production of this artist. I'm referring to the interpretation process in which the communication is mediated always by the otherness and the tension of a repertoire most of the time not understood. This process generates new meanings and is also valid. After all, the Trans-Caribbean identity is also that: a hypertrophied form of identity. Tempered by distance, memory, and fantasy, this legacy often comes to us by second or third hand. Extrapolated from their original context, and now exposed to a new environment, new elements are added into that chameleonic spirit, this capricious creature that is the Trans-Caribbean identity in the midst of contemporary urban culture.

Janet Batet

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Re-Collections (Photo Collage), print on canvas, 66" x 35", 2008