

# CARLOS BETANCOURT

## IMPERFECT UTOPIA

FOREWORD BY RICHARD BLANCO  
INTERVIEW BY PAUL LASTER  
ESSAYS BY ROBERT FARRIS THOMPSON

EDITED BY PETRA MASON

Skira *RIZZOLI*  
NEW YORK



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# MEMORY AS TRUTH

FOREWORD

RICHARD BLANCO

*Beauty is truth, truth beauty that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.* Those are the closing lines from *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, one of the most acclaimed poems of the nineteenth century, by one of its most cherished poets, John Keats. The poem is also a fine example of an ekphrastic poem which responds to another type of artwork such as a sculpture, painting, or dance performance. Extending this definition, I would qualify my friendship with Carlos as a kind of ekphrastic relationship: he (the visual artist) and I (the poet) engaged in conversation over the past two decades (and to this day), discussing the nature of one another's craft and the practice of art—the compass through which we've gotten a fix on the nature of our existence, our place in this world, and the meaning of the influences, obsessions, and memories that have surfaced in in our lives and in our respective disciplines throughout the various stages of discovery and personal growth.

But I must confess: I am not an art critic or art historian, nor a visual artist for that matter. I can count on the fingers of one hand the few times I've dared to tackle a canvas with a paint brush or take a photo with any artistic intention other than to capture smiles above the glowing candles of a birthday cake. As such, perhaps

I am one of the least likely persons to write about such an accomplished artist as Carlos Betancourt; yet, on the other hand, I may be one the best persons to do so because I know Carlos Betancourt like few others know him: as a confidant, collaborator, mentor, cohort, and most importantly, a friend. We have trusted and learned from each other since the day we met almost twenty years ago.

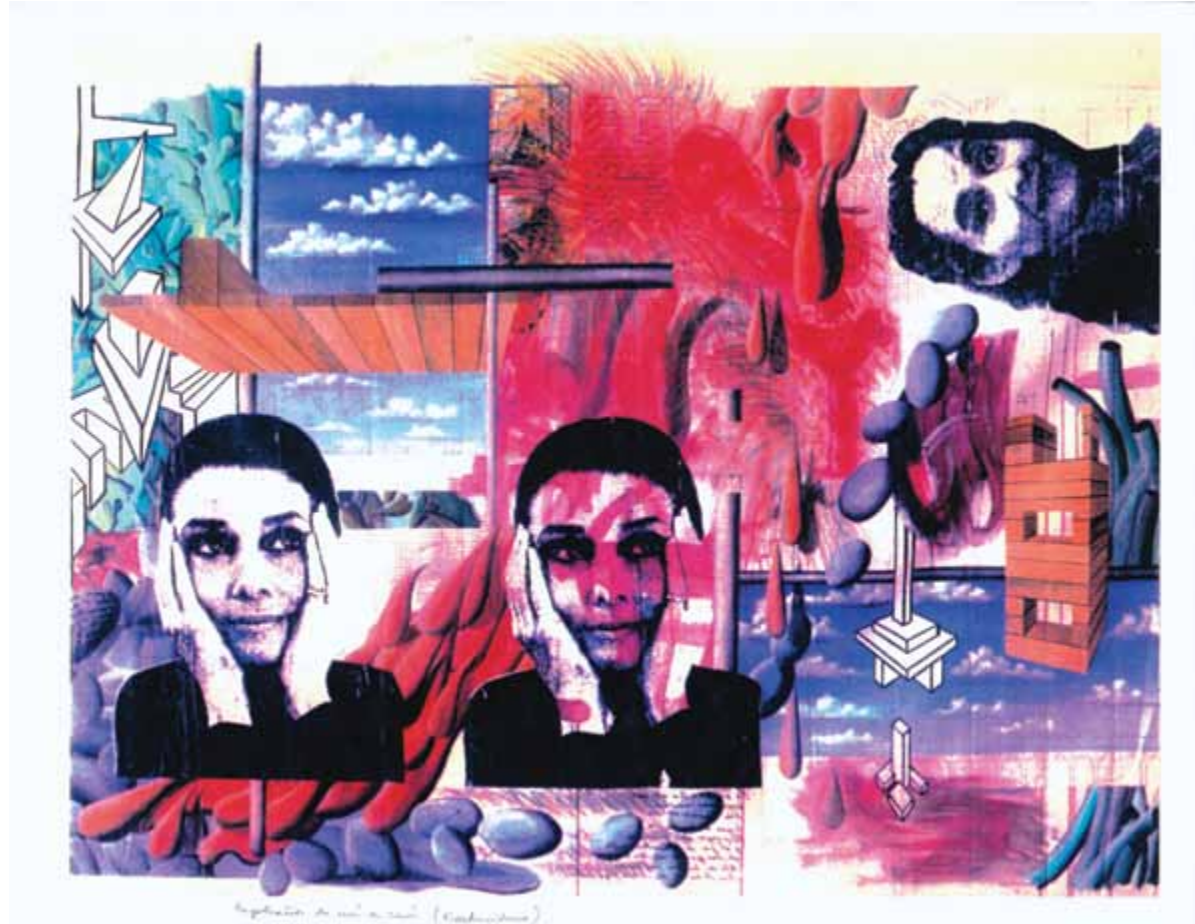
If you believe, as I do, that art is a miracle, a mystery, a kind of transubstantiation in which the musician becomes the very music, the singer becomes the song, the dancer becomes the dance, and the artist becomes his work, then I hope these words I share here—this portrait of Carlos through the lens of my life with him—will parallel an understanding of his work, and that these snippets of personal narrative will compliment other more academic analysis of his art. To speak of my friendship with Carlos is to speak of his work, and vice versa—they are inseparable to me. He and his art are not objectified, rarified subjects, but rather, real influences that have shaped the understanding of my own life and poetry.

As if scripted by Shakespeare himself, the first time I met Carlos he paused in the middle of our conversation to point up at a falling star.

“Magical...” he said without taking his gaze off the sky, as if he were speaking to the stars as well as me, as if they could answer back. Indeed, there was an aura of wonderment about him, and yet, a certain melancholy, a sense of displacement under that vast starry night. I knew at that moment that I would never look at the stars the same way, and that I’d never meet another person like Carlos. We became instant friends and spent the rest of the night talking about practically everything under the

stars: Celia Cruz and Andy Warhol, fractals and poetry, Iris Chacon and Octavio Paz, Morris Lapidus and memory—many of the obsessions that I would eventually see layered onto his canvases.

Carlos was a well established artist by the time we met—one of the main pioneers of the art scene that precipitated the renaissance of South Beach during the late eighties and into the early nineties, working enthusiastically from his old studio, the celebrated Imperfect Utopia.



“Fracturism Happy B-Day form Me to Me,” which juxtaposes silkscreens of Audrey Hepburn with the dissident Cuban poet, María Elena Cruz Valera. My first book of poetry echoed many of the thematic concerns and obsessions that I shared with Carlos and his concept of Fracturism. But at present, I’ve also come to believe that Fracturism has extended and lent itself to our contemporary lives. Given the many choices we are faced with daily, the explosion of information and mobility, and the exposure

speaking about our Cuban *abuelitas*, or the historical narratives of the Conquistadors; the whimsical beauty of the Art Deco hotels of Miami Beach or his passion for Borinquen and its the primordial waterfalls of Puerto Rico; sometimes speaking telepathically to each other across the room: Carlos working quietly on a painting in one corner of his studio, and I drafting a new poem in another corner, glimpsing over at his brushstrokes. I believe we had gotten a pretty good grip on our personal



opposite  
Fracturism Series:  
Feliz Cumpleaños De Mi A Mi  
1993, acrylic paint and  
silkscreen on canvas

Fracturism exhibit at  
Imperfect Utopia, 1993

Album Series:  
Always The Same Piñata,  
2006

I, on the other hand, was merely a budding poet entertaining the idea of abandoning my career as an engineer in order to pursue writing. But despite the different stages of our lives as artists, we were both beautifully fractured beings—or so I came to understand after Carlos explained *Fracturism*, a term he had coined to describe the thematic principals of his work at the time. *People like us*, Carlos taught me, *are made up of multiple cultural identities, languages, and histories; we are driven to assemble those fractured pieces of the whole.* Indeed, as children of exiled Cuban parents (he born in Puerto Rico and I born in Madrid),

we were both proudly struggling with, as well as delighting in, our multi-dimensionality and transnational identities.

And that was exactly what Carlos’s canvases reflected then, each one layered with bits and pieces of images and iconography he was claiming, reclaiming, and collecting in order to create a mosaic of the self. A self that included American donuts and Cuban coffee, La Lupe and La Virgen de La Caridad, African deities and fashion models, the streets of Miami and the rainforest of el Yunque in Puerto Rico. There was no limit to Carlos’s vortex of inclusion, as in evident in one of my favorite of pieces,

to cultural diversity that are all trademarks of our time, we have all become fractured, splintered in some way. As Carlos predicted through his early work, the essential dilemma of the twenty-first century person is to try and assemble ourselves into an integral, genuine whole from all that is given and available to us.

Nevertheless, over the next few years, our painter-poet friendship continued to evolve around the proverbial campfire of Fracturism, which was central to our art, our being, and our conversations: sometimes while sitting on his rooftop, cradling glasses of Merlot and listening to the distant breathing of waves drifting in from the beach two blocks away; sometimes

narratives by then, but as it happens during one’s late twenties and early thirties—and after watching many more falling stars—we both began to question if that personal narrative in our work was enough: *Was that the only way we could speak? Wasn’t there more?*

Of course there was—and Carlos’s work, as well as my poems, took a turn in a new direction as the new millennium approached. We sought to express the specifics of our “fractured” experiences though a less private, more universal language, and began exploring the perennial themes that were fundamental to our personal stories. In my case, after having travelled to Europe for the first time I started



writing poems with a more cosmopolitan sensibility, while Carlos, an endless traveler himself, immersed himself in the language of exploration, mathematics, cosmology, and science. Always a voracious reader, I watched him pore through books by Carl Sagan, Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks, anatomy diagrams, star charts, and even my old calculus and physics textbooks from engineering that he would borrow from me. In the exhibit, "Images from Heaven," Carlos developed a new vocabulary of imagery and iconography: gyroscopes and nautilus; skulls and pendulums; globes and planets orbiting around text, including excerpts from my poems that he incorporated in the piece, "Eternity" (1997).

"I'm going to the circle. I want to can get in. If I can't, I'll sneak in," Carlos called to tell me one day. He was referring to the Miami Circle, an archaeological site discovered in downtown Miami, containing the remains of a structure believed to be built by the Tequesta Indians between 1700 and 2000 years ago. The development company that happened upon the site was forging ahead with plans to build a high-rise; great controversy ensued between the developer's interests and preservationist efforts. Carlos indeed managed to get into the site and spent weeks alongside archeologists and other volunteers sifting through artifacts. Every night he'd share with me highlights from his day, his eyes filled with marvel and glee like a seven year old boy who'd been playing all day, returning with caked dirt underneath his fingernails.

I believe the Miami Circle prompted yet another turning point for Carlos and his work: it spawned an utter fascination with artifact and object. More importantly, it triggered a lasting obsession with the signs, symbols and arcane text of the ancient Taíno culture of his native Caribbean basin. These became another language with which to tell his story and struggle with identity. In a dramatic shift, he practically abandoned painting, preferring three-dimensional wall assemblages and photography; nature became his blank canvas which he colored with powered pigments and projected light that he photo-documented in the series "Projections and Pigments" from the 1999 to 2000. During this period, works like "Guanajatabeyes" and "Jatibonico Borinquen" deal almost exclusively with ancient, abstracted symbols, providing an even more elemental language than the laws of physics and science

that he had been exploring, as well as a more malleable diction than the face-value images of Fracturism. His new-found obsession culminated with the *Sounds Symbols Project*, a site specific installation (in collaboration with Alberto Latorre) spanning an eighth of a mile across the sands of Miami Beach, resembling a crop circle, or an unearthed archeological site, much like the Miami Circle.

References to his personal narrative became oblique at best, and, surprisingly, human figures were practically absent from his works. Then Carlos's grandmother—his *abuelita*—died. She was a sustaining force in his life—and he missed her terribly. One late afternoon while we were walking along the boardwalk in Miami Beach, he broke down and asked me: "And how is it that one is supposed to go on?"

"No puedo..." Of course, there was nothing I could really say to comfort such a loss; as a good friend, all I could do was stand in solidarity with him, as we questioned our own mortality, in silence, our shadows slanted across the sand dunes as we both stared off into the horizon. In the Afro-Caribbean tradition of faith and ancestral worship, it is believed that the spirits of our ancestors never abandon us. Carlos took comfort in that belief, and indeed he continued to feel her presence and intercession, perhaps even more powerfully. He would constantly tell anecdotes about her, quote her wise sayings, as well as her jokes, as he remembered her and all her being. His grandmother and the spirit of their relationship is memorialized in "Self Portrait with Letter to Aracoel" (2001), one of Carlos's most personal and evocative pieces.

But the physical absence of his grandmother replaced by her spiritual presence, stirred a certain consciousness in Carlos, an awakening to what his work was fundamentally always about—memory. He turned to conceptualized photographs as the medium through which to capture all he had worked with before: the frenzy of Fracturism, the primordiality of symbols, the spell of narrative, the immensity of nature, and the arrest of the human form. These all converge as composite images in artworks like "Portrait of a Dream" (2005) and the "The Hedge" (2007) which trigger a archetypal sense of remembering rooted in Jung's concept of the collective unconscious. When I encounter constructed photographs such as these, I get a distinct sense of remembering "something" intimate, yet distant; real, yet imagined;

tangible and intangible—like something I forgot to remember, or a dream I suddenly recall in the middle of the day. And I rush to fill his photographs with my own memories, with a narrative—real or imagined.

Carlos's work incites us to remember, and as such, he reminds us that memory is fundamental to human existence and the human psyche. As a twist to René Descartes' famous proposition (*I think, therefore I am*), Carlos's work says to us: *I remember, therefore I am*. He at last found a way to discuss memory—a complete language for memory that is both universal and individual, conscious and unconscious, sacred and profane, cultural and commonplace, religious and pagan, ancient and pop. Historically, archetypal images have been appropriated and preserved by myths, religion, and empire. But as these have lost their hold on society, the archetypes that connect us to Jung's collective unconscious have also withered. I believe that one of Carlos's lasting contributions to the world of art and the understanding of our humanity is the way he unifies the present while reprocessing the past, offering a contemporary substitute for those archetypes through his work.

Carlos's more recent work in series, beginning with "Re-Collections X-XII, 2010" through *Disposable Memories, 2013-14*," explore the power of objects: machetes, beauty crowns,

Christmas tree ornaments, birthday cakes, flamingos, trophies—to evoke memory in a more pure and simplified manner. Unlike the sporadic sensibility of Fracturism, he is now consciously assembling, arranging, and juxtaposing and re-interpreting objects as a medium for memory. He is re-collecting. Once, over a drink at the Cardozo Hotel in Miami Beach, Carlos told me: "To be an artist is to be part of something that doesn't quite exist yet." His sea-green eyes as piecing as those words have stayed with me to this day. Like Carlos, I live my life and my art by them. And so, I wonder what's next for Carlos (and me). But for now I will close where I began with my own take on ekphrastic poem: If Keats believed, as he wrote, that *Beauty is truth, truth beauty*, then I will say that Carlos has convinced me that *Memory is truth, truth memory*. And that is all ye need to know.



# CARLOS BETANCOURT'S IMPERFECT UTOPIA

INTRODUCTION

PETRA MASON

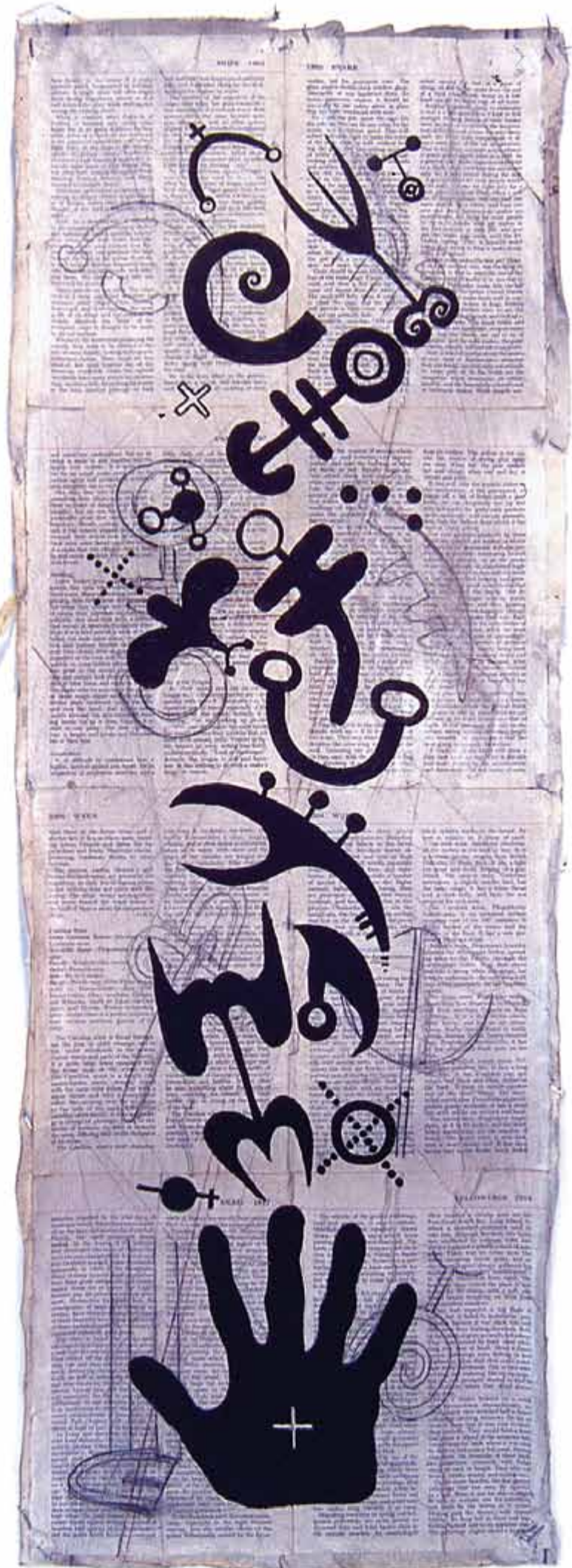
Betancourt not only demonstrates an intelligent and exuberant use of post-modern artistic language, but he is very valuable yeast in the culture of the Caribbean and his home island of Puerto Rico. Widely travelled, he has long observed, and participated in, Miami's transformation from a refuge for the risqué and the superannuated to a great city with an international reputation as an art destination. Its subtropical pace, verdant waterways, and glamour is reflected in his work, as is the abundance of trinkets which infest every corner of a resort city that caters to so many visitors and immigrants. He accepts it all with a generosity of spirit he probably learned from his birthplace, where santeros rub shoulders with contemporary artworks in a world full of syncretism; where the history of conquest is seen on every street, and where Spanish and indigenous influences have finally melded into a society that is recollected with delight by anybody fortunate enough to have experienced it.

Anything is grist to Carlos' artistic mill—plastic fruit, Styrofoam angels, exquisite antiques, broken cups, bric-a-brac from a treasure trove of junk— and is handled with a sensibility that is all his own. Looking at his assemblages and collages is a humbling experience for art lovers. Here ephemera and mementoes are given the respect that

anonymous people have long given to personally valued but worthless trivia. We enter into a relationship with the objects and their unexpected juxtapositions, and we become part of a great democracy; one of those who love things and the memories they evoke. Carlos playfully reveals their dormant beauty and cuts across the sometimes snobbish hierarchies of the art world while doing so.

Some of the works are large, but we are drawn into them with a desire for intimacy, as if we are privy to love letters. His works bring us back to a world where privacy can still exist. We are rewarded by snippets of recollection, and by festivals of color that have never known restraint. Betancourt's work confirms in us our humanity and need for joy.

San Juan, Miami, New York and the burgeoning population of art students in other cities and small towns are fortunate. A fellow artist has bridged the difficult gulf between the beauty of the provincial and the international without losing a sense of identity and an appetite for invention. He accomplishes this rare achievement in part by reinterpreting memory and placing it in a new context that becomes relevant to our hurried times, reminding us to slow down and smell the flowers. And as he likes to point out, "not everything old is bad, not everything new is great."



Untitled III (Reclaiming Petroglyphs),  
1997-1999  
Gesso paint and collage on canvas  
50 x 16 in.

opposite  
Cuba Cola Series: The Hand, 1992-94  
Acrylic paint and silkscreen on canvas  
60 x 48 in.





top  
Fracturism: Cultura Fracturada, 1993  
Acrylic paint and silkscreen on canvas  
88 x 66 in.

above  
Fracturism: Viaje Y Destino De Raiza La Balsera, 1993  
Acrylic paint and silkscreen on canvas  
55 x 42 in.



opposite  
Cuba Cola Series: El Corazon, 1992-94  
Acrylic paint and silkscreen on canvas  
60 x 48 in.



opposite  
Appropriations Del Mar Y Amor, 2014  
(with Alberto Latorre)  
Mixed media



following spread  
Appropriations From El Rio, 2013  
(with Alberto Latorre)  
Mixed media  
96 x 192 x 192 in.





above  
Torta Atomica, Murano, 2012  
Murano Glass, gold leaf  
18 x 15 x 15 in.



following spread  
Golden Pond Wishes, 2013-14  
(Installation detail; dimensions variable)







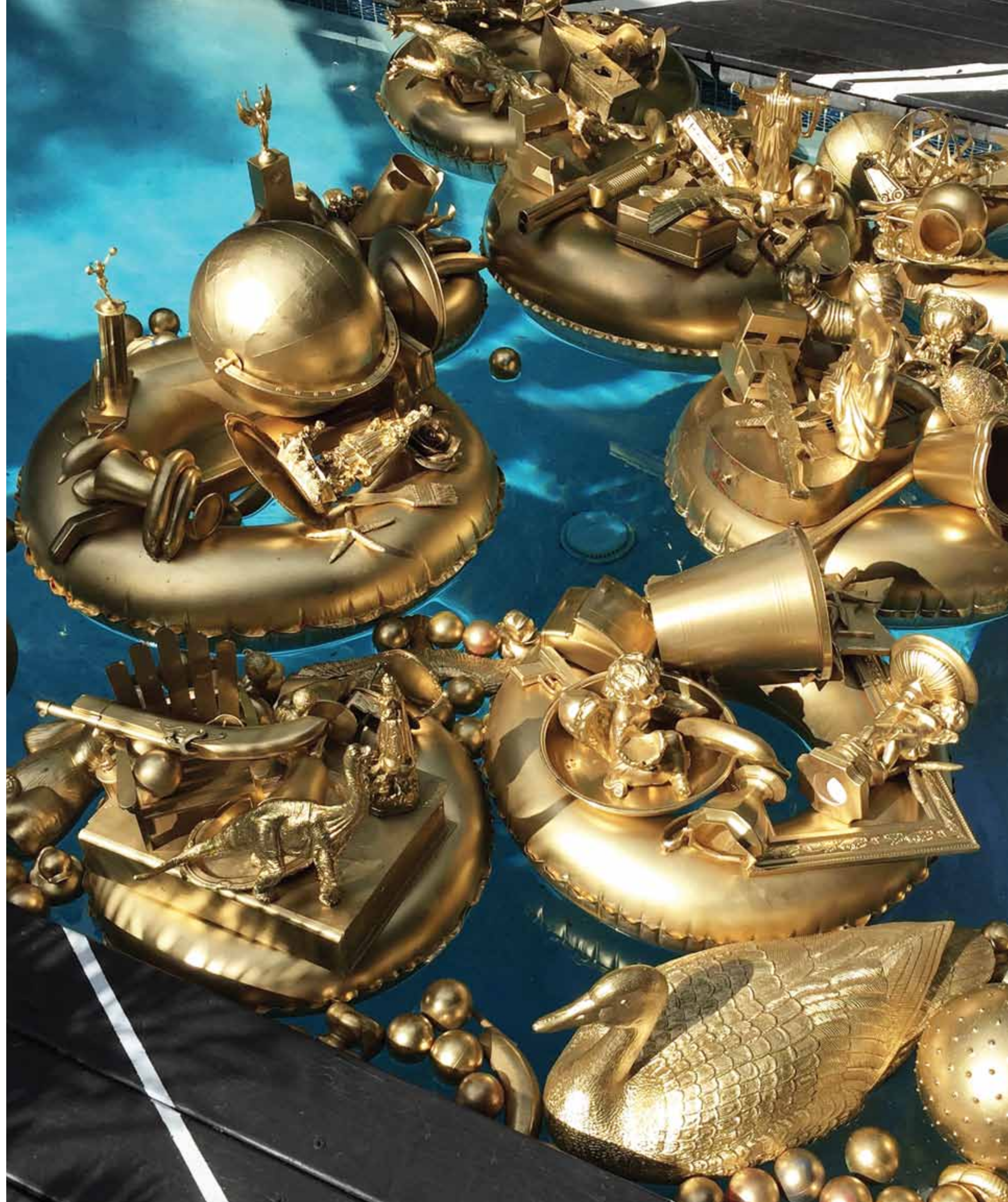
above  
 Wall Assemblages Of Things Past I, 2012  
 Mixed media on wood paneling  
 55 x 71 x 14 in.

opposite  
 Golden Pond Wishes, 2013-14  
 (Installation detail; dimensions  
 variable)

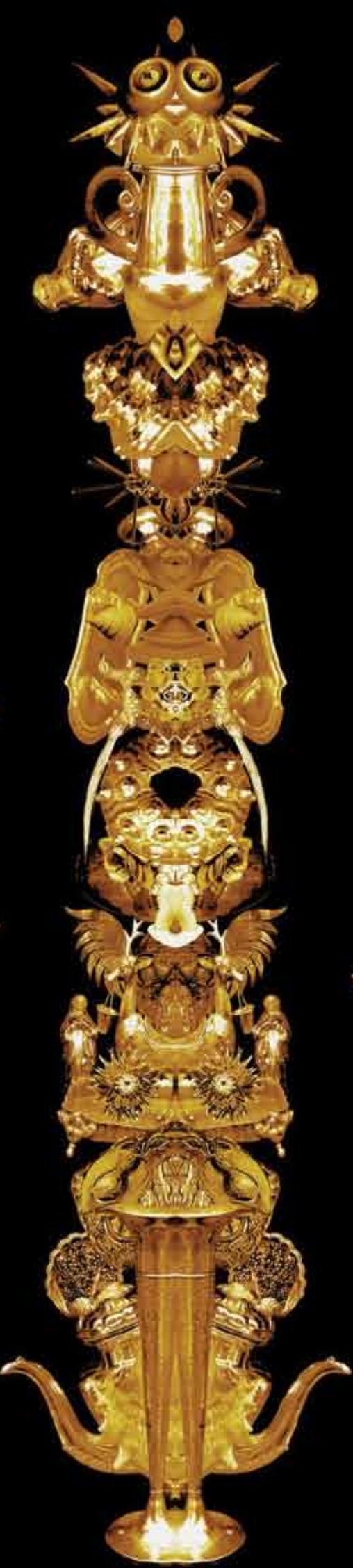
following spreads:  
 left: Amulet for Light I, 2012  
 (detail)

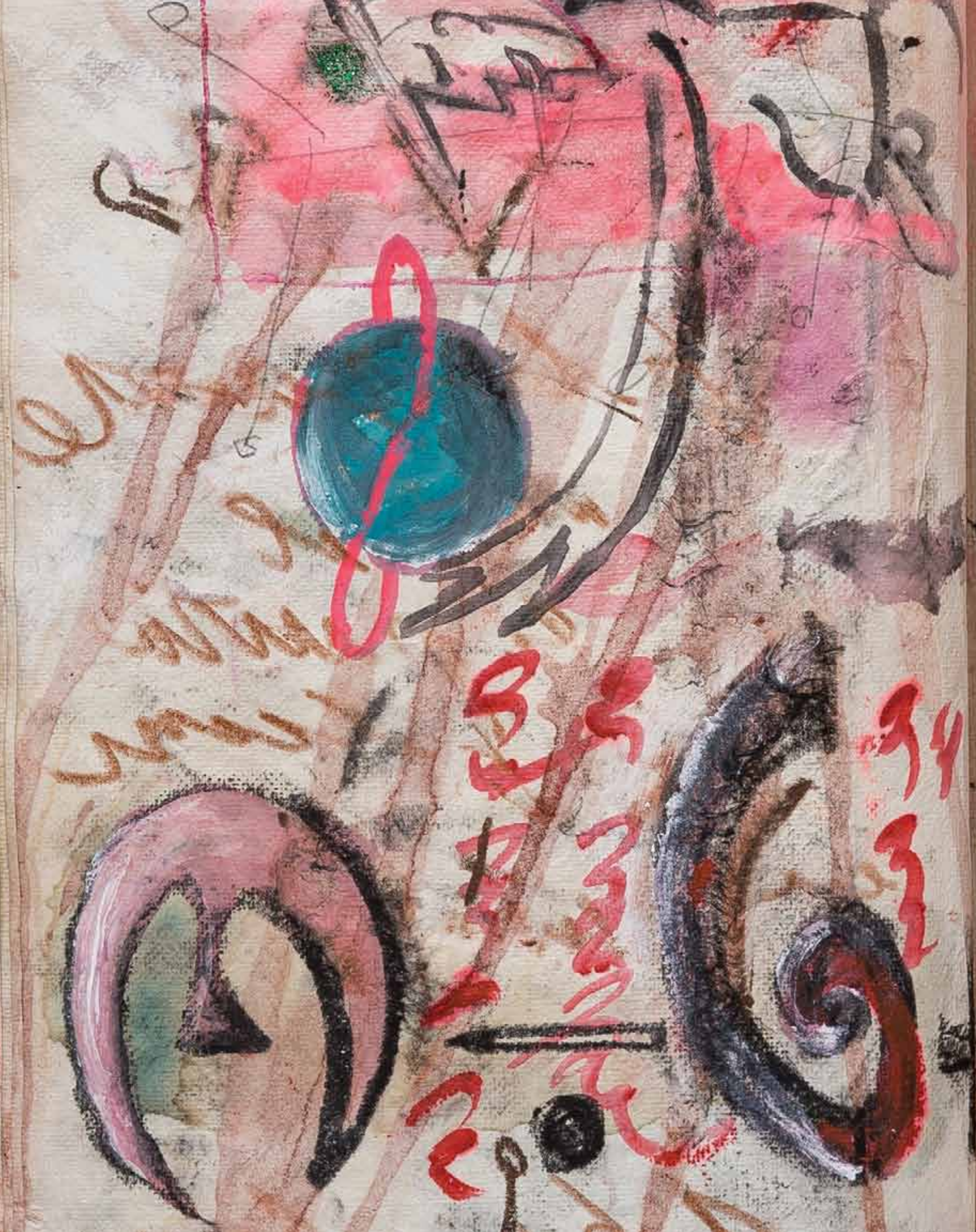
right: Wall Assemblages of Things  
 Past III, 2012  
 (detail) Mixed media on wood paneling  
 50 x 60 x 12 in.

Amulet For Light I, 2012  
 Digital image on photographic paper  
 72 x 110 in.















previous spread  
The Cut-Out Army, 2006  
Pigmented inkjet print on Sintra board  
Dimensions variable

The Cut-Out Army, 2006  
(Installation details, dimensions variable)

following spread  
The Cut-Out Army, 2006 (print detail)  
Pigmented inkjet print on paper  
30 x 34 in.









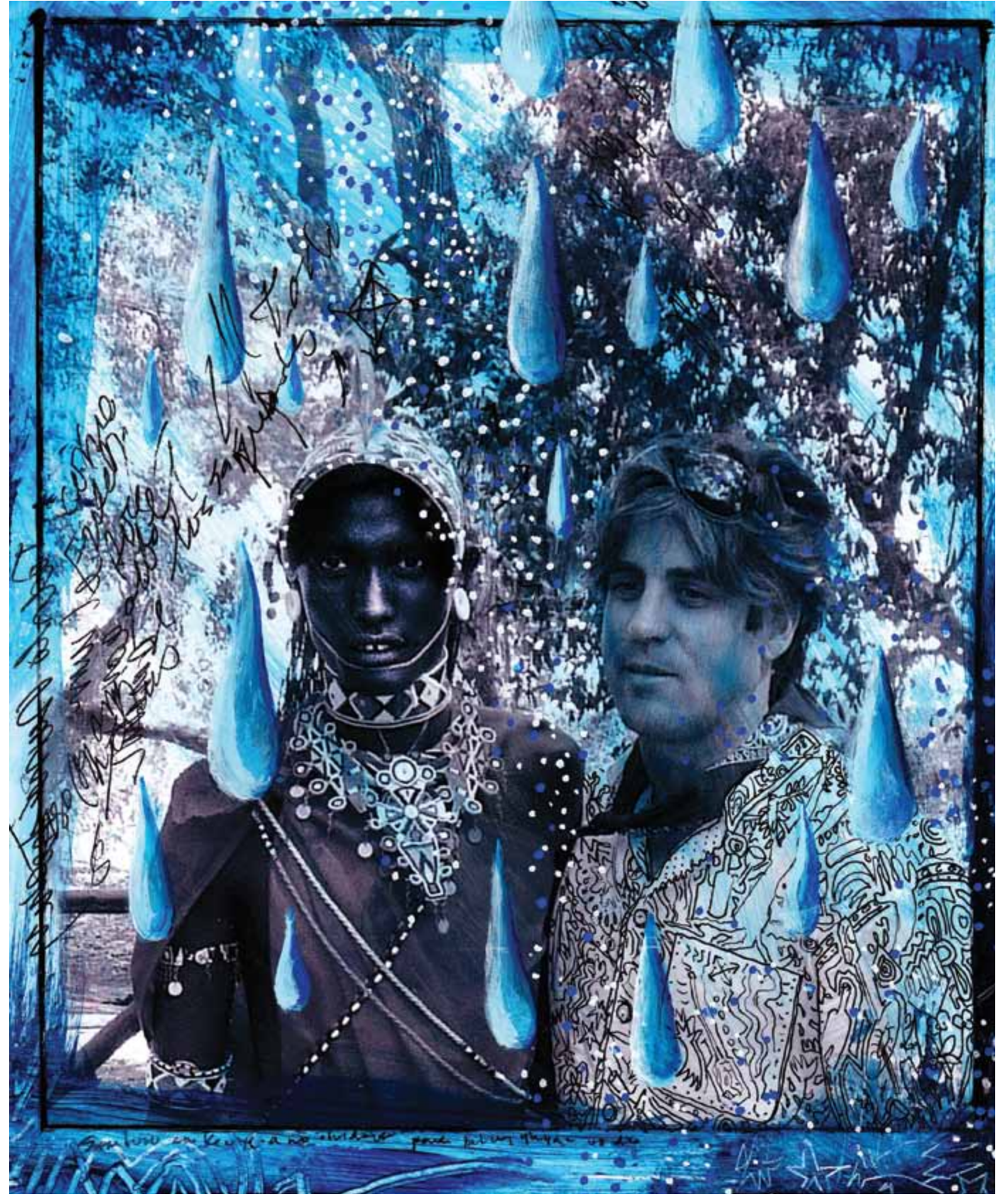
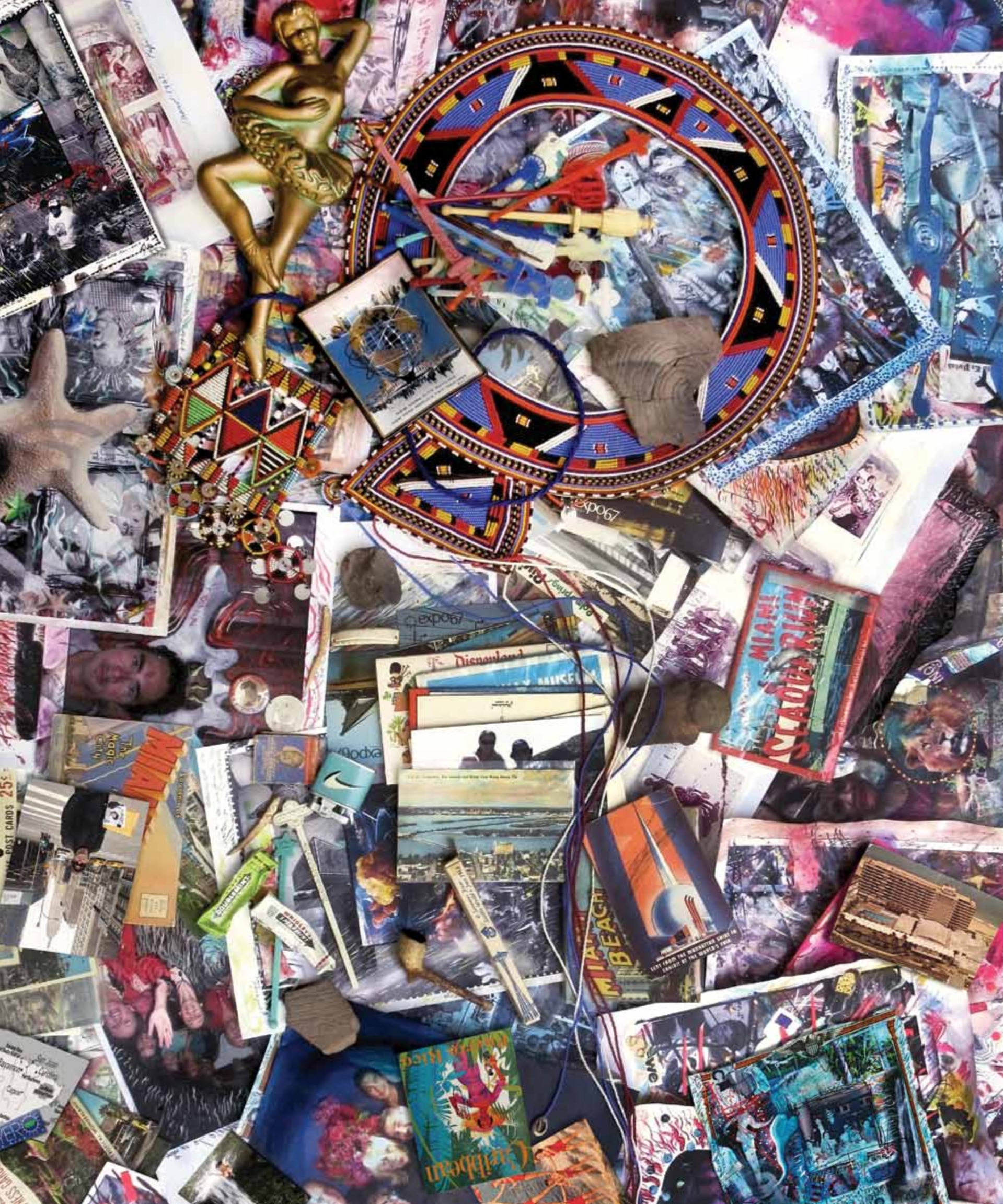
*Handwritten text in a cursive script, possibly a quote or a note, located in the upper right area of the collage.*

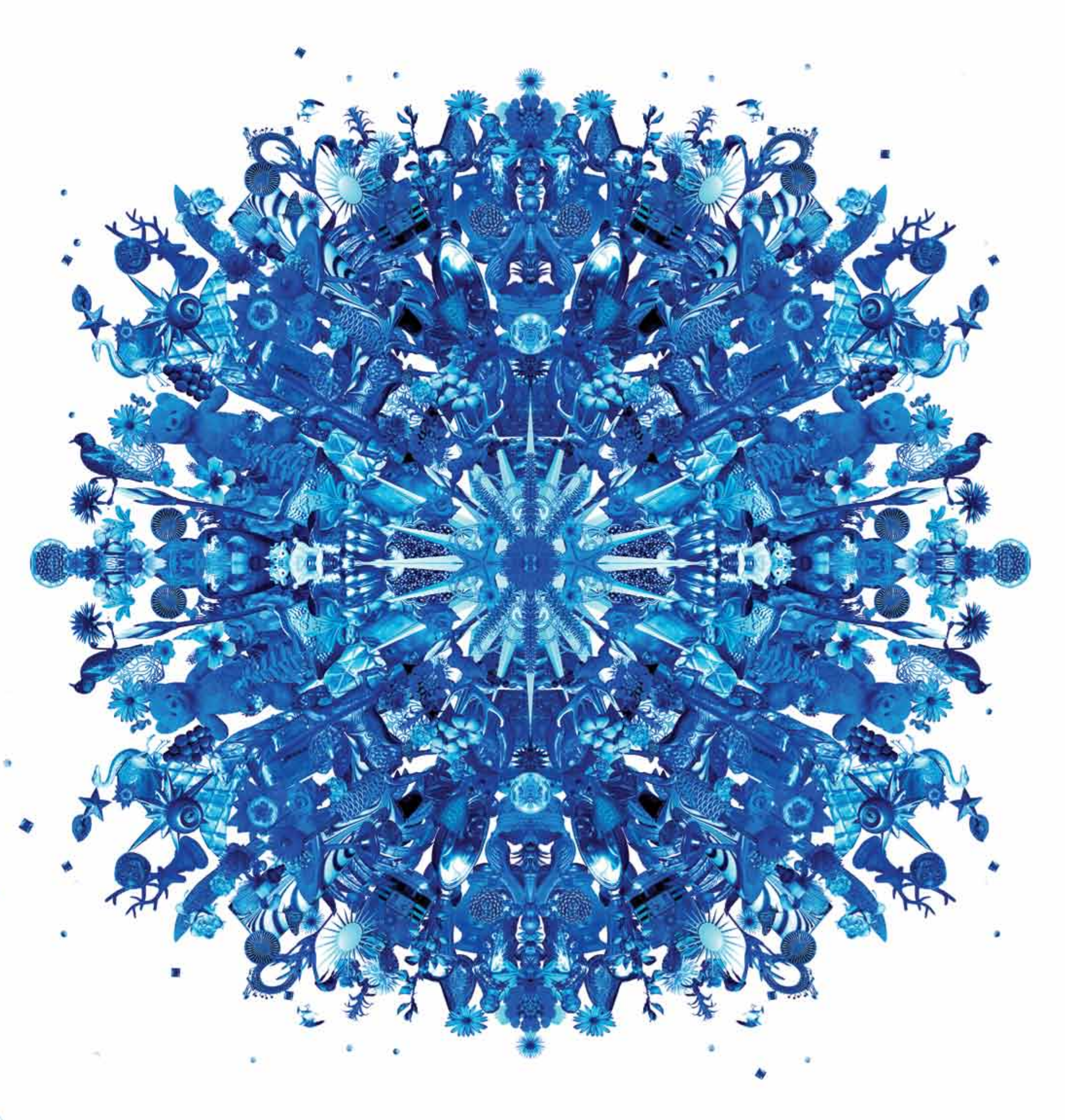
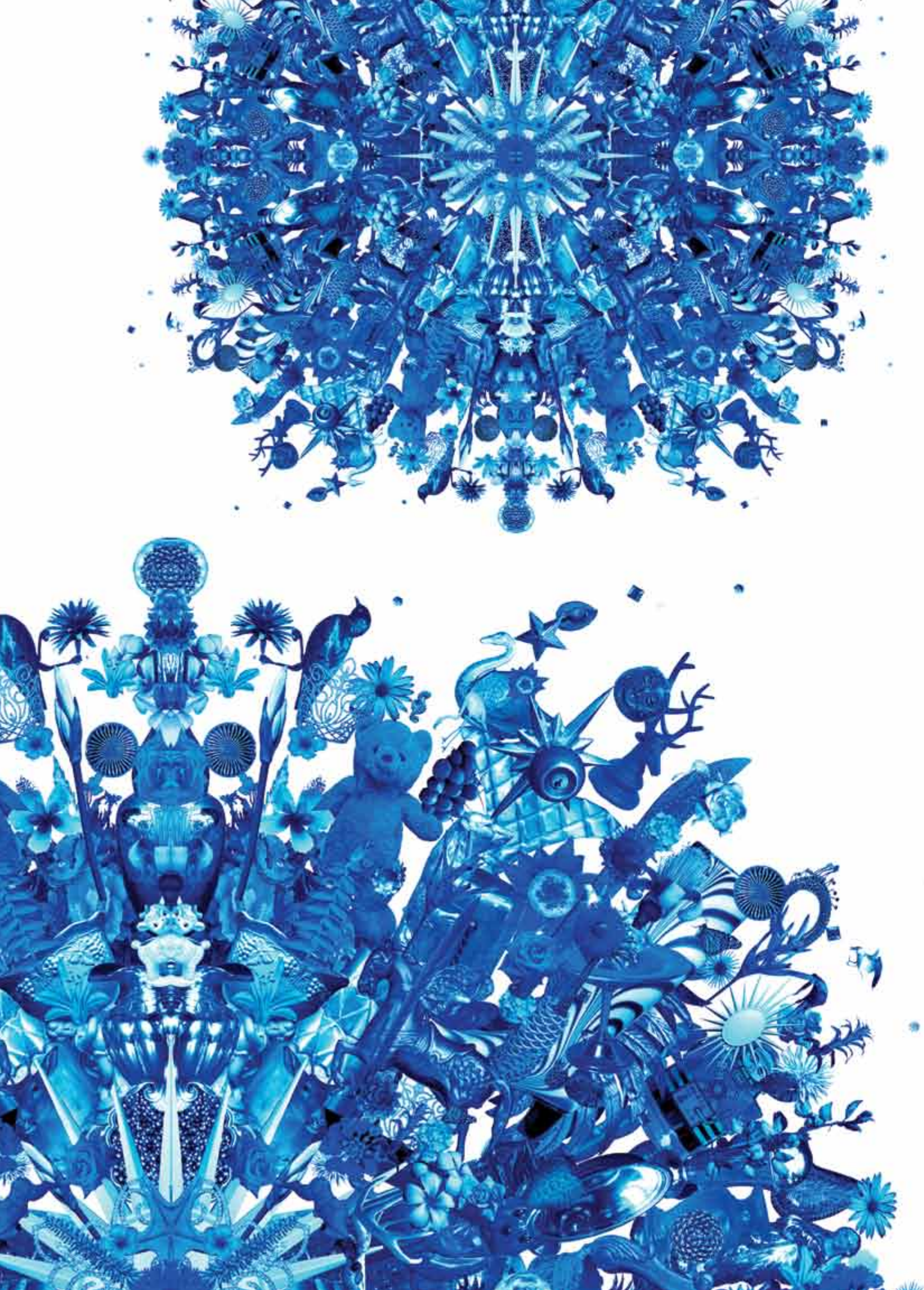


**care**

**we**







previous spread  
Re-Collections XVII (Mykonos), 2011  
Digital image on photographic paper  
72 x 72 in.



above  
Dear Walter, 2012  
Pigmented inkjet print  
36 x 36 in.







previous spread  
Re-Coleccions VI, 2008-09  
(detail)

opposite  
Re-Coleccions VI, 2008-09  
Pigmented inkjet print on canvas  
50 x 50 in.

following spreads  
The (Last) Supper, 2008  
(detail)

The (Last) Supper, 2008  
Pigmented inkjet on paper  
35 x 120 in













previous spread  
Let Them Feel Pink With Cake, 2012  
(sculpture construction)

above  
The Hedge, 2007  
Pigmented inkjet on vinyl  
78 x 300 in.



# INTERVIEW WITH CARLOS BETANCOURT

PAUL LASTER

**PL:** I initially saw your work in shows at Robert Miller Gallery in New York in the early 2000s. Tell me a little about your solo exhibit there. Few artists were working with such large prints, least of all on vinyl, that was kind of revolutionary...

**CB:** The exhibit was in part the summary of the series *Interventions in Nature*, which the late curator Antonio Zaya called *Photo Performance*. It was a body of work that I had been possessed by for a long time and it was exceptional to see them all together in such an ideal exhibition space. The placing of the large prints on vinyl in the space in Chelsea was flawless, and the impressive high-resolution quality of those huge works was rare at that time as well as the printing in vinyl. It was thanks to this exhibit that I developed a special bond with art dealer Walter Otero as well as collector Jennifer Johnson.

**PL:** How did you meet Miller?

**CB:** It is interesting to note that every time I

traveled to NYC as a young artist I visited the Robert Miller Gallery on East 57th Street. I enjoyed the artworks of almost every artist they exhibited. I didn't meet Bob Miller until years later when our mutual friend, Marissa Boyescu, shared my artwork with him, introduced us, and we all spent a beautiful morning snorkeling together. Bob and I quickly formed a great friendship. He was a genius and an outstanding editor. It was wonderfully organic that I would end up being represented by Bob's gallery, and it was a, enriching experience.

**PL:** *The Cut-Out Army* was an installation that stopped me dead in my tracks. It was exhibited in a big warehouse space in Wynwood, and the related large prints were at Art Basel Miami Beach in 2006, which was also when we first met. Who are the people in *The Cut-Out Army*?

**CB:** I'm glad that you enjoyed it. They are a collection of people that I related to in one way or another. They included members of my family and close friends as well as strangers.

**PL:** Where did you photograph them?

**CB:** Most of the individuals were documented in

opposite

Rincón Flamboyant Series:

Family Portrait With La Prima Bailarina De Flamenco, Nietzsche y Paya Paya, 2005 Color photograph  
50 x 45 in.

their homes. Each subject was invited to select and use an object that they could relate to, or to which they were attached by memory. Both of those elements were part of my criteria..

**PL: Why do so many of them look like space travelers?**

**CB:** I was playing with my partner and architect Alberto Latorre with a 1960s plastic terrarium bubble for one of his projects when he placed it over his head. Spontaneity is important to me, and that moment triggered a connection to an image by photographer Bunny Yeager that I had come across years earlier and had kept for inspiration. It showed a bikini girl with a space bubble on her head in a very casual beach setting and it made a lot of sense to me. I grew up watching *The Jetsons* cartoon series, simultaneously surrounded by mid-century architecture in Puerto Rico. So, perhaps the space bubble alludes to the futurism-optimism of that era. It is also a shield, a mask, perhaps protecting and elevating people that I love or admire.

**PL: What were you trying to represent in the installation?**

**CB:** For the most part, my artwork is created out of a visual need and it is best understood purely visually. The limits of the written word may restrict the full comprehension of the artwork. Maybe I was organizing analogous people, which is something I responded to in some of Richard Avedon's early work. Every time that I walked each aisle, I was able to interact with the installation and to see part of myself as each of the subjects stared back. The subjects were warriors, avatars, gods, a sort of celebration of the individual and their like-minded understanding. As a kid I was intrigued by the Terracotta Army of Xian, China and I collected literature about it. Eventually I was able to visit it, and the Terracotta Army was very much present in my mind as I developed the installation.

**PL: When I next saw you in Miami during ABMB in 2009, it was at your opening for the sculptural installation *Portrait of a Garden* and photographs from the *Re-Collections* and *Lapidus Infinitus* series. By then, representations of nature and found objects had taken on a dominant role in your work, and collage and assemblage had become important ways to convey your ideas. What was the point of departure for the sculptures?**

**CB:** The images from *Lapidus Infinitus* were

demanding to become more three-dimensional, so I listened to them and you can easily see their continuity in the *Portrait of a Garden* sculptures. I really enjoy constructing and assembling, so naturally I was experimenting in the studio on how to carry on the collage and assemblage concept three-dimensionally in a more formal way. One day, while driving in Los Angeles by a strip mall, I noticed a nursery and garden shop. The salesman had displayed many faux columns at random, each with an irrelevant faux sculpture on top. It was phenomenal and I thought it was very "Lapidus," which is what I call things that resemble something that architect Morris Lapidus would have done. He used to visit *Imperfect Utopia* frequently and I admire him greatly.

These faux columns in the strip mall inspired me, and I was just being a vehicle that became *Portrait of a Garden*. I tend to be very curious and aware of the present, continuously contemplating what I see around me. The present is where everything happens, and art is everywhere, anywhere, all the time.

**PL: What were you thinking about while assembling them?**

**CB:** I was wondering if the salesman at the Los Angeles nursery shop would be proud of the final installation that his display had triggered. But when I returned, the shop was no longer there. In any case, the nature of creating art is part exploration and invention, and the faith that eventually most will see what the artist sees. Only the artist and the work will be part of the future—and one trusts that the understanding will come. In this case, when placing the objects instead of human statuary on pedestals, the elements became forms and the forms became objects of worship.

**PL: Why did you present them as monochromatic works in blue?**

**CB:** Blue is the color that evil can't cross, according to West African tradition as described in Robert Farris Thompson's book, *Flash of the Spirit*. The book was influential in my formation as an artist. I have used similar blue hues in previous works, specifically the *Worshipping of my Ancestors* installation in which I empowered my beloved grandmother's personal objects with cobalt blue glitter.

**PL: And why were the walls red?**

**CB:** Red was used to inject the room and the sculptures with life. Red is the color of blood,

energy, desire, war, power. It is a very emotionally charged color and anything with emotion is alive.

**PL: Were the photographs in series *Lapidus Infinitus* made with conventional cut-and-paste collage methods or digitally derived?**

**CB:** Both. I admire the work of artist Neo Rauch and many of his paintings are perspective oriented and have a very collage-like quality, yet it does not compromise the real one plane surface of the painting, which I really enjoy. With my photo-collages I didn't want to lose the one plane surface either. To accomplish that, some layers were created as cut-and-paste, then photographed and arranged digitally. Yet the print is developed with photographic process techniques.

**PL: How many elements are at play in the prints?**

**CB:** I may add thousands of elements to one print before I am satisfied, as in many of the *Re-Collections* series artworks. I have built a unique collection of clip art images consisting of thousands of diverse elements archived in categories such as tree trunks, graffiti, African masks, vintage postcards and personal items. Almost every object I have owned has now been transformed into clip art.

**PL: Why did you build this clip-art collection?**

**CB:** I like to archive things that move me and touch me in one way or another. They are what I react to.. It is a process of assembling all that I know.

**PL: What are you trying to convey? An energy? A spirit?**

**CB:** The places I am from and the things that I am moved by are very alive to me. *Cultura Viva*. Poetry is a living thing to me, and I see my artworks as poems. However, they are poems that are conveyed visually.

**PL: The *Amulet for Light* series, which I first viewed in your open studio during ABMB in 2012, continues this form of collage in a more complex and intricate way. What are the objects and how did you manipulate them?**

**CB:** André Breton said that Wilfredo Lam had mastered the union of the objective world and the world of magic. The *Amulet for Light* series was inspired by Lam's *La Jungla* (*The Jungle*), and explores issues of identity between Picasso, Breton, and Lam, which I have found fascinating. The objects are from a friend's collection of silver

that is housed in an 18th century ranch in Texas. These reflective and metallic objects are then mirrored to create symmetry in the towering totems or amulets, resulting in unexpected primitive shapes. I first played with the idea for the series during one of my regular visits to El Yunque rain-forest in Puerto Rico. I think that I continue to use references to primitivism as a source of natural empowerment, so that I can always return to the source. I have waterfalls and seashells in my head all the time.

**PL: What led to the choice of colors?**

**CB:** The initial expression was gold. But it was too tempting not to explore other palettes, given the emotional subject matter of identity and primitivism.

**PL: The gold version seems especially significant since you have continued to use gold for other works; what does the usage of gold imply?**

**CB:** The color of gold has many connotations and it is very relevant today. Gold can be enthusiastic and optimistic. It implies wealth and status in every country, culture and market in the world. Gold is also illuminating and, as with other works, I mostly use it to indicate "magical" properties, imbued with an almost spiritual presence.

**PL: During ABMB 2013 you premiered the first of your suspended collage sculptures, *Appropriations From el Rio, As Time Goes By*, which was commissioned. Observing it, I was captivated by the sheer number and variety of things hanging in it. What were you trying to capture?**

**CB:** I'm not sure if the correct word is "capture." I was maybe transforming the *Re-Collections* photograph series to a three-dimensional composition, just as I was doing with the *Lapidus Infinitus* photographs that I translated into the sculptural assemblages. Alberto was the instigator and very instrumental in the production of this monumental work. It made sense to both of us that the *Re-Collection* series wanted to be expressed three-dimensionally. As with the *Re-Collection* series, *Appropriations from el Rio* grabs objects associated with memories and re-directs them. There is tension and history in the piece; it is about blending and mixing. This artwork is alive. It is almost a deity. The presence of each object is triggered by an instant bond in my brain that I don't care to question, but it is obviously associated with memory.



**PL: Are the objects real or cast?**

**CB:** Most of the objects are real. Some of the elements are mass-produced. There are skateboards, trophies, African masks, real pearls, and a beauty queen crown. Many of the objects are notably familiar elements in my artwork. I had used the beauty queen crown in previous artworks, so it was only natural to appropriate it from my own realm and to position it in a new context. There are also Tequesta Indians artifacts from my personal collection. Many of the oars in the sculpture I found washed ashore a while back. They mostly belonged to Cubans rafters (balseros) trying to reach the US shores.

**PL: Why did you paint it black?**

**CB:** Many artworks dictate their destiny. This was no exception. It craved to be mostly jet black.

**PL: In spring of 2014, I made another studio visit, where I saw two works from the new Disposable Memories series in progress. Old jewelry, belt buckles, and 99-cent store kitsch come together to make a collective memory of Miami. Where did you gather all of this stuff?**

**CB:** Jewelry is so embedded with memory. So I asked friends to give me any jewelry-oriented objects that they no longer wished to possess. I also collected many pieces from thrift shops and jewelry stores. I arranged with employees so that I could acquire bags of broken jewelry before anyone else could grab them. I had no clue there was such demand for broken jewelry.

**PL: How is it assembled?**

**CB:** It is complicated. It involves a lot of physical pressure and containment. a mould and epoxy resin.

**PL: What does it mean to you?**

**CB:** It all started as an attempt to collect the disposable memory attached to jewelry and to see if the jewelry pieces could transcend their physicality, even as they are no longer attached to someone. To me, they were very magical works. I try to give the objects the protagonism that they deserve, at times equal to the people, as in part people are made of the memory attached to objects.

**PL: I've seen your Art in Public Places commissions for the Miami International Airport on multiple occasions. What do the overall forms of the installations suggest and how did you come**

**up with the idea for the shapes of the individual elements that create each installation?**

**CB:** During that time I was a volunteer at an archeological site in Miami, and that experience heightened my interest in artifacts and objects. I was immersed in pre-Columbian and Taino culture, as well as western African culture and art. And I was exploring issues of identity, communication, and history. The overall abstract and primitive forms, as well as the individual elements, were intended to challenge and intervene in the contemporary and sterile setting and architecture of the airport terminal. In other words, it is an attempt to engage the past with the present. Even devoid of much reference, the shapes became authoritative and empowered. I was recycling the past to make sense of the present.

**PL: What's the material?**

**CB:** Various stone types in the walls and laminated glass on the elevators. The shapes were cut with a water jet.

**PL: How long did you work on the commission?**

**CB:** After I was awarded the commission I worked on the project for more than three years. Back then it was not very common to do this type of work, so production took a while. Installation was particularly time consuming, as each panel was very heavy and fragile. Alberto managed this commission and sometimes we collaborate in other commissioned and site-specific work as well. I studied architecture as well as design, so this type of work is very fluid to me, as it allows expression in other fields that interest me.

**PL: All of these works that I mentioned seem to be related to mining memories. How important are personal memories and collective memories to your work?**

**CB:** Throughout many years there is a common denominator in my artwork that is kind of effortless. In a way, my artwork is my own syncretic religion. The people and objects (my memories) are my offerings. It is the result of the syncretism of our times.

**PL: Nature plays a big part in both your continuing Intervention series and in the Re-Collections works, which we previously discussed. When did that interest develop and what role does it play in your production?**

**CB:** If I had to choose between city and nature, nature has the upper hand for me. Puerto Rico is

a very lush and green island and, thanks mostly to my father, I was immersed in all of its natural and enchanting splendors more or less since I was born. I am very influenced by that experience and I believe that owning your heritage, your journey, leads to a universal voice. Since moving to Miami, I have traveled continuously to Puerto Rico, and quite a lot to El Yunque rainforest. The Re-Collection series, was conceived in El Yunque. Fortunately, we recently acquired some acres of the same land that has inspired some of my artworks, land that is surrounded by dozens of waterfalls, Jurassic-era size plants, coquis (small frogs endemic to Puerto Rico) and (fireflies). In Miami, almost everywhere you go there is always the water. Sometimes with the perimeters of Miami being the Atlantic Ocean and the River of Grass (the Everglades), this close presence of huge bodies of water can make you forget that you are not on an island. I thrive in the middle of all this water, seeing references to it in my artwork. I was and continue to be moved by the clashes of urban life against backdrops of the natural world. Making collage—organizing the fractured pieces and re-examining the world around me—is a natural composition solution. When producing my artwork, all of nature comes into play. It is the source and you can always go back to it for more. I see my artwork as possessed by a kind of hopeful jungle.

**PL: You're not afraid to embrace concepts of kitsch and make something beautiful out of it. What's your fascination with kitsch?**

**CB:** Some people argue that beauty is neither profound nor intellectual and most of the times there is a rejection of it for fear of appearing superficial, when actually embracing beauty can be very sublime.

Memory can be linked to any object, including kitsch. Sometimes I react to kitsch because it is part of that from which I have been made of too. I don't like to discriminate much with the things that move me. There is a certain democracy, human innocence, and celebratory qualities embedded in things kitsch, and that is attractive to me. It is an expression of human culture at a particular time and place. Ponce de Leon's Fountain of Youth, James Deering's flamboyant Villa Vizcaya, Walt Disney World, plastic flamingos, the Fontainebleau and Eden Roc Hotels, Bunny Yeager's photos of Betty Page, are all fantastical ideas that Florida provoked, and these have been assimilated in my artwork one way

or another. Transforming kitsch into something more beautiful is sort of organic for me, but the kitsch deserves the credit as provocateur

After an object is injected with a personal or collective memory, it is empowered and it starts losing its material aspect as it is elevated to the pantheon of emotions. Kitsch objects are not immune to this, I like to contribute to the significance perhaps by stripping the pieces of their kitsch aspect and having them dwell in realms where it is memory, not so much aesthetic, that dictates the value and the character.

As I mentioned before, the great architect Morris Lapidus, who was under-recognized back then, used to visit Imperfect Utopia and we spend long ours talking about architecture as well as Miami Beach. He was one of the first artists (as an architect) to give Miami a unique language, and it had to do a lot with a thoughtful understanding of finding inspiration in kitsch. His work is now highly recognized and influential worldwide. You can still travel back to kitsch Miami Beach if you know where to look.

**PL: How did you begin working in Miami in the 1980s? Can you describe that unique period on South Beach?**

**CB:** Just before finishing high school in 1983, I volunteered to help on a project the artist Christo was installing in Biscayne Bay, Surrounded Islands. The fuschia pink color of the surrounded island and all the kitsch that it represented had a solid impact on me. Christo was staying in the Leslie Hotel in the now famous Ocean Drive in Miami Beach. Back then, Miami Beach was literally falling apart and plagued with crime. However, if you were attentive you could see the appeal and the shape of things to come. I was immediately mesmerized by Art Deco architecture as well as Jetsonian architecture and the potential of a paradise in ruins. I decided that after art school I would return to Miami Beach.

I joined the Miami Beach Preservation League with Leonard Horowitz and Barbara Capitman and I was shown pictures of Warhol walking the street of Miami Beach, which sparked my curiosity. Everything in Miami Beach was connecting or clashing when I returned from art school and that was appealing to me. I quickly opened Imperfect Utopia in Lincoln Road and was accepted into the South Florida Art Center. Soon the underground scene was beginning to thrive, with creative forces finally bonding more and conflicting less: young visual artists, musicians, dancers,



poets, gays and remarkable drag queens mixing with aging go-go dancers and switch board ladies. It was a remarkable period, as most people attracted to South Beach during this era were artists and creative people. We all seemed to be linked together with similar interests and a profound need to express ourselves and the future. As usually happens with special places, perhaps like, Soho, the Village, Montmartre, etc, at their peak, we knew it was a unique moment. It lasted for a long while, and I am very grateful to have participated in such a unique time.

Eventually in the late 90s, bohemian celebrities, the jet set, and models began to appear and the merging continued to the collaged sounds of Frank Sinatra, Echo and the Bunnymen, and La Lupe. Then, just like other places, gentrification began.

**PL: Another thread that runs through the work is history, your own personal history and the history of the places where you have lived, people that you've met, and places that you've visited. How did that develop and how does it get materialized in your creative process?**

**CB:** It all manifests as collages in my head and materializes as assemblages of all kinds. The idea tells me the medium. The experience of creating art can be as simple and as fulfilling as picking up seashells. I have waterfalls and seashells in my head all the time.

The answer to how it developed is a bit more complex. My personal history is much informed by my personal interests. When I look at the work of the many artists that I enjoy, like Peter Doig, David Hockney, Felix Gonzales-Torres, Shinique Smith, Arnaldo Roche, Nick Cage, Allora and Calzadilla, Alice Neel, Andy Warhol, Matisse, Picasso, or Jeff Koons, I always see their history in their artworks. Formal art questions are constantly being addressed by artists, yet individual history is married to the process of art creation, just as some flowers are red because there are hummingbirds in the area.

I have come to realize that all people have their own kind of exile. We have all been disconnected from something at some time, and that is why maybe foreign places and different cultures have also been life-long interests of mine. Personally, I

have been very fortunate to travel to Asia, as well as Africa and the Americas and I have collected the past (history) for as long as I can remember. I collect many tangible things, sometimes for inspiration, including photo albums from strangers. I enjoy researching the history of my family and I enjoy reading almost anything with historical references. I have been involved in several historic preservation projects, most recently the preservation of the Miami Marine Stadium. Yet photo albums possibly influence the history aspect in my artwork the most. Photo albums were all that was left of my parents' humble life in Cuba. Growing up, I attempted to experience my parents' past through those photo albums, as there was nothing tactile to account for their life prior to 1959, not even their wedding rings, which were hidden in a Havana backyard so they would not become property of the State.

Many times I helped my parents assemble photo albums of things past and those albums were always in the present. Finally, when I was about nine years old, I ordered by catalog a Canon AE-1 camera and began arranging my own photo albums. Somehow and quite suddenly we moved from Puerto Rico to Miami, and again the only thing left (besides some basic clothing) were the photo albums, old ones and new ones.

When I started re-collecting the now-vintage glass Christmas ornaments that my parents had sold to raise funds for our move to the States, I looked carefully at our Christmas photo albums in the hope that I could find the exact ornaments hanging from the skeletal, yet dreamlike trees in the faded photos. That research developed and materialized as the Re-Collections installation, now consisting of thousands of vintage glass Christmas ornaments.

I think Facebook and other photography-based social media are the current interpretations of photo albums, fulfilling the human need to share: I exist and I feel; I have seen and I have touched. The camera does wonders for our endemic need to say we exist.

We are living in a particular time where the past is very accessible. I still get to visit pretty much the same Tomorrowland and the same rainforest to which my parents once took me, provoking new interpretations and understandings. In the creative process the artist can contribute new history to all the artists that came before him, perhaps even by adding to something new.

opposite:  
Rincón Flamboyant Series:  
Family Portrait With La Prima Bailarina De Flamenco, Nietzsche  
y Paya Paya, 2005 Color photograph  
50 x 45 in.





opposite  
 Interventions in Wynwood I Series  
 Hood On The Hood With Sunflowers, 2003  
 Pigmented inkjet print on vinyl  
 108 x 77 in.

top  
 Interventions in Wynwood I Series  
 Hood On The Hood Tennis Shoes, 2003  
 Paint, glitter, wire, tennis shoes  
 Dimensions variable

bottom  
 Interventions In Wynwood Installation, 2003  
 Paint, glitter, candles, skateboards, tennis  
 shoes, soil  
 Dimensions variable





opposite  
Wynwood (old studio backyard), 2003

following spreads  
Interventions in Nature II Series  
Una Ceiba En El Rio, 2001  
Pigmented inkjet print on vinyl  
66 x 90 in.

Interventions in Nature II Series  
Hura Y Digo, 2001  
Pigmented inkjet print on vinyl  
60 x 120 in.

Flag (for Kiki Smith), 2004  
Digital image on photographic paper  
21 x 31 in.







opposite  
El Portal III, 2011  
Digital image on photographic paper  
72 x 72 in.

following spreads  
El Portal II, 2011  
Digital image on photographic paper  
72 x 115 in.

El Portal I, 2011  
Digital image on photographic paper  
72 x 107 in.











GABI

WENDY  
LEGAR

DOPE

Katia

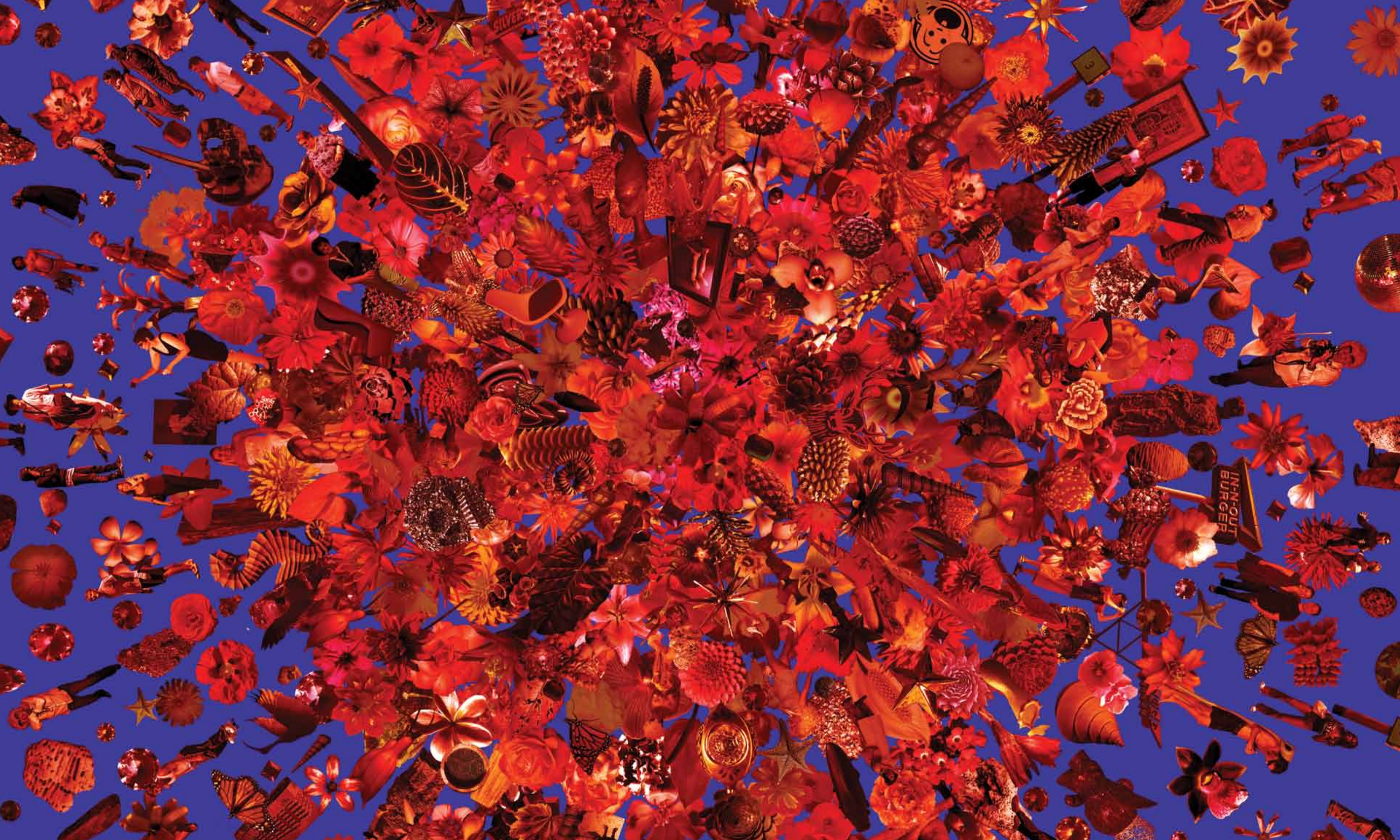
STANLEY

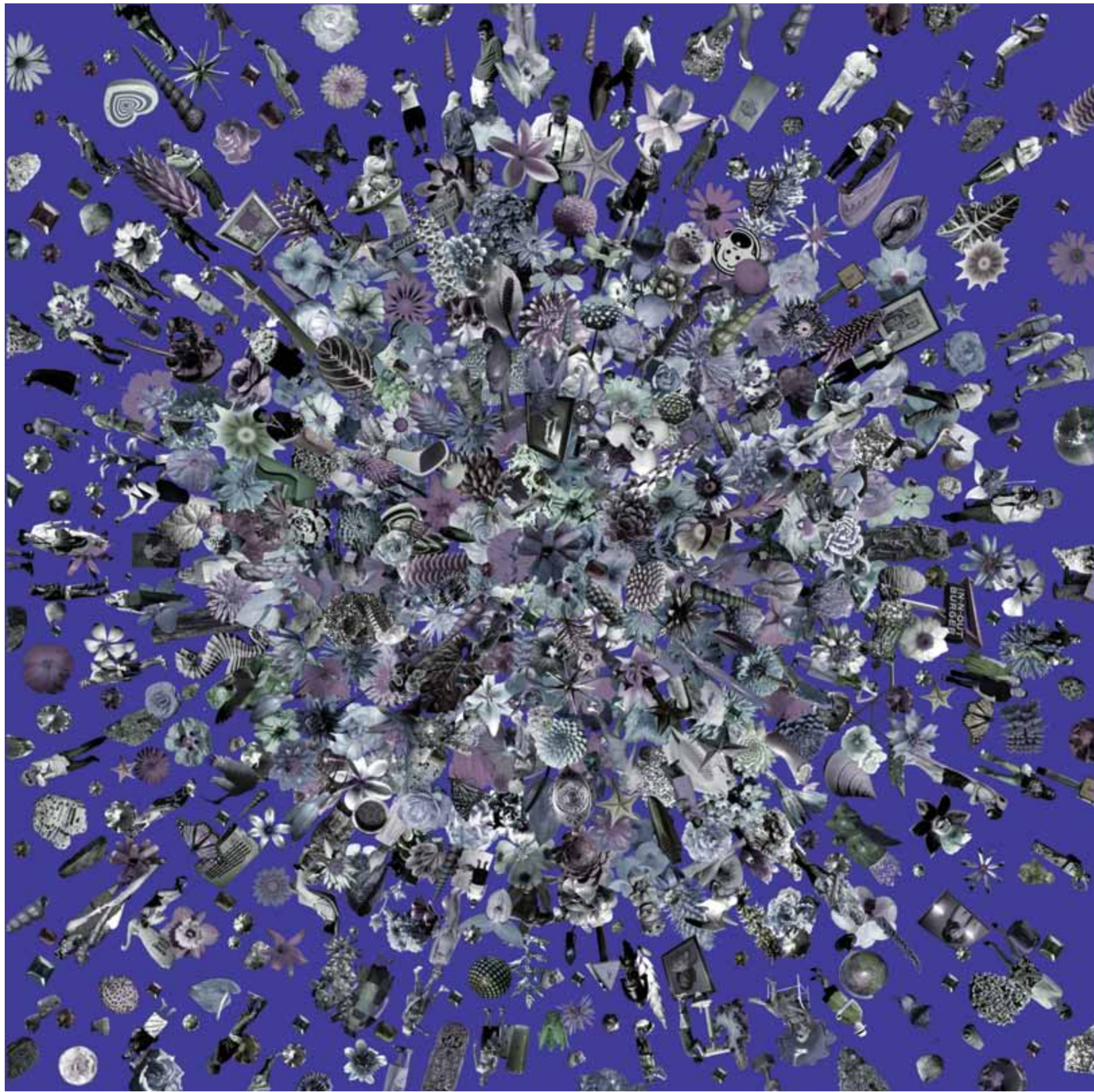
UP

As/Datos de Nutrición  
por abstracción: 2. Amoro  
Total 6 y 6% DV, Sodium  
13 y Proteína: 10  
porcentaje de la

FOR, and ornamental, and  
New York, New York  
1785



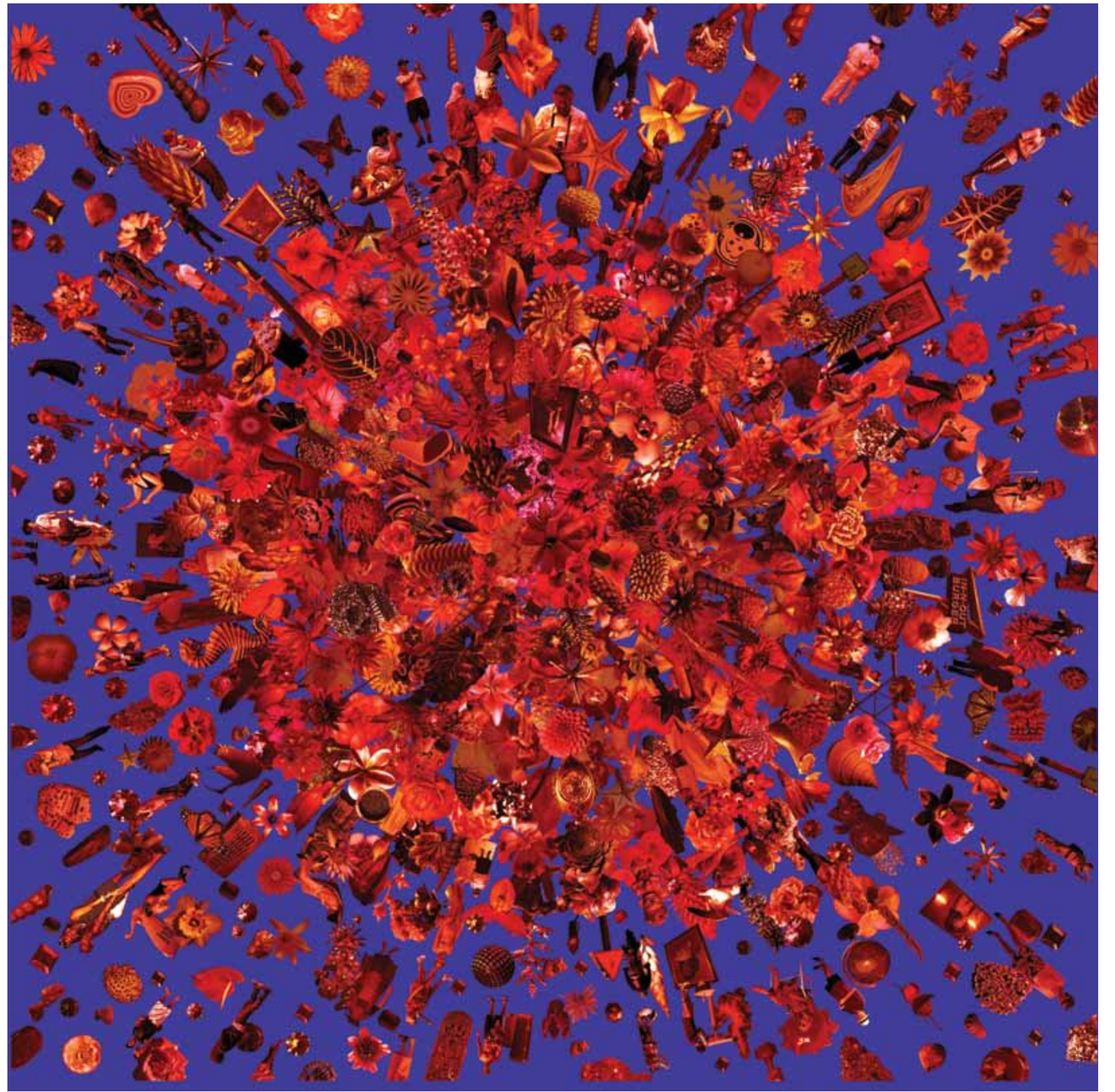




previous spread  
Re-Collections VIII (rojo con azul), 2009  
(detail)

above  
Recollections VIII (gris), 2009  
Digital image on photographic paper  
72 x 72 in.

opposite  
Recollections VIII (rojo con azul), 2009  
Digital image on photographic paper  
72 x 72 in.

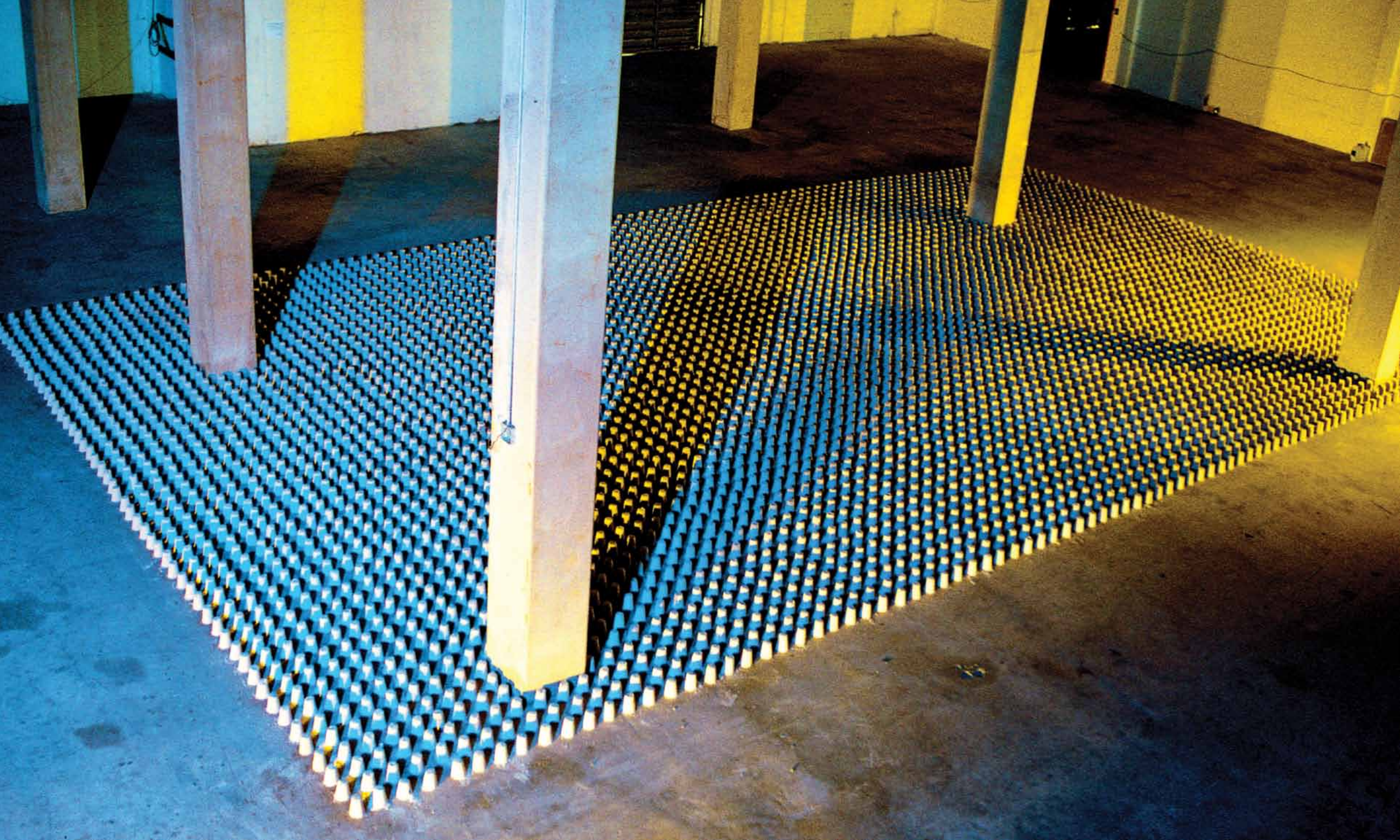




above  
Disposable Memories I, 2012  
Mixed media  
48 x 48 in



following spread  
En La Arena Sabrosa II, 2014  
Sand and glue  
Dimensions vary

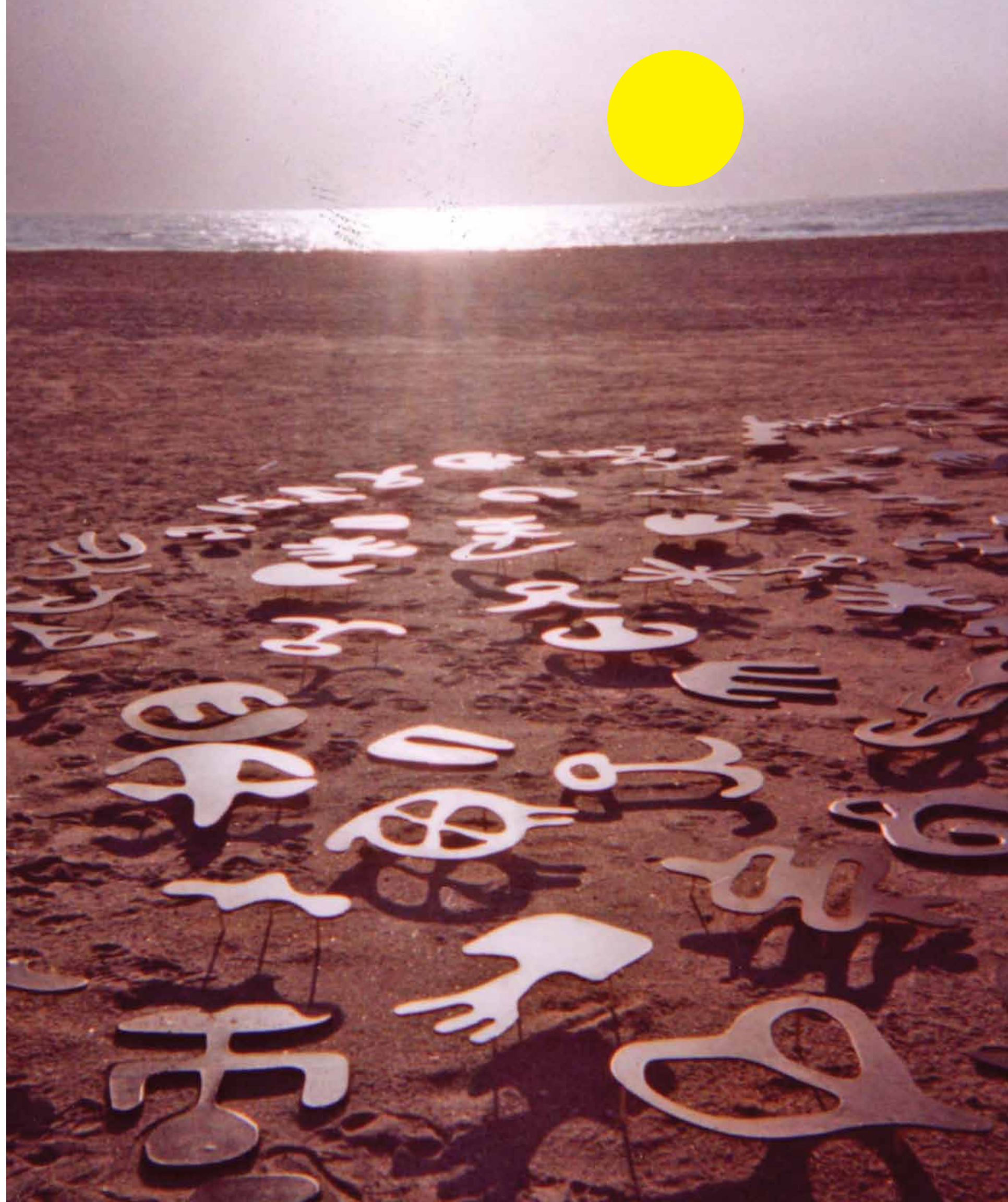




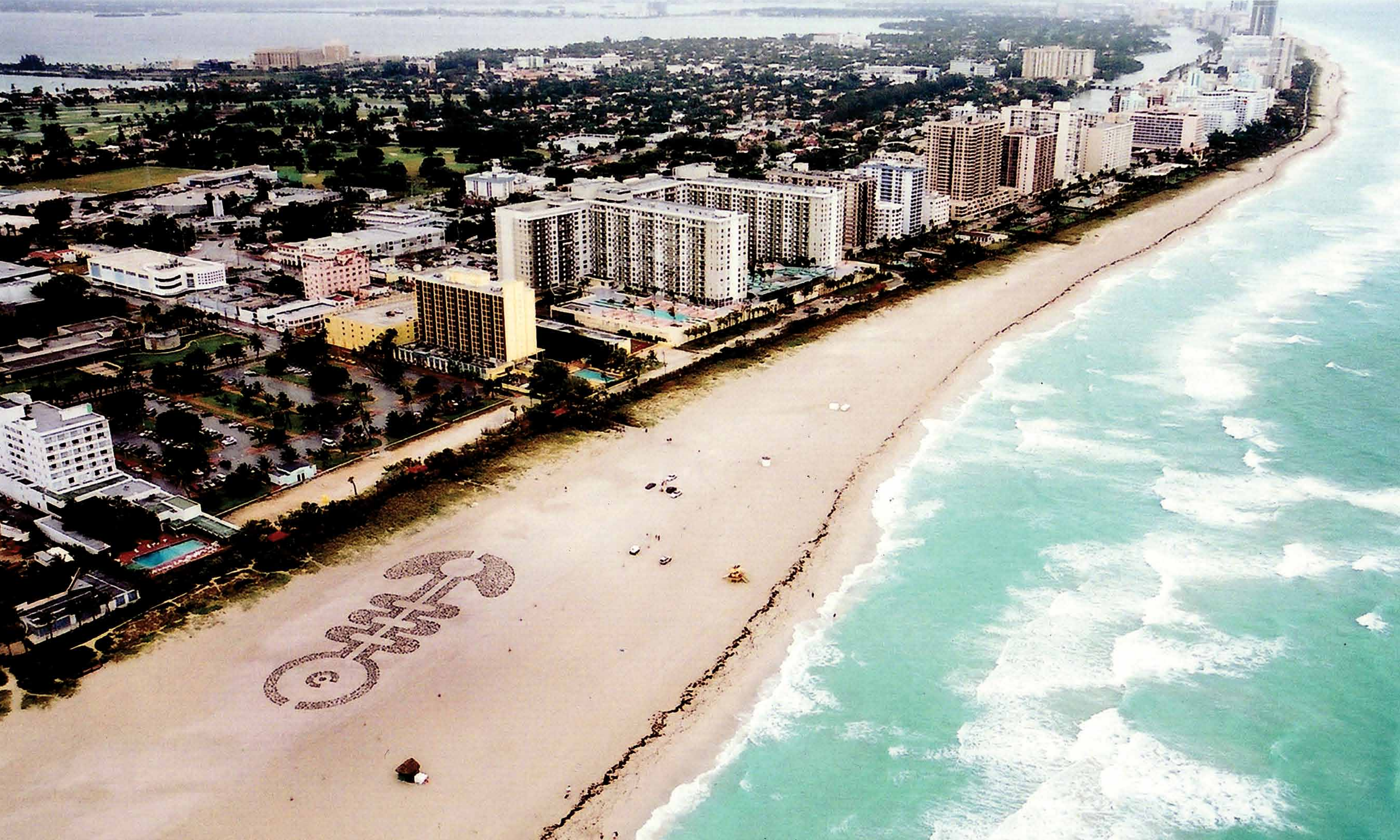
top  
Metacomet Wampanoag,  
( New England) 1999  
photo print on aluminum light box  
17 x 20 x 6 in.

bottom  
Guanajatabeyes, Cuba, 1999  
Print on aluminum light box  
36 x 24 x 6 in

opposite  
Sound Symbols Project, 2000  
(installation detail)



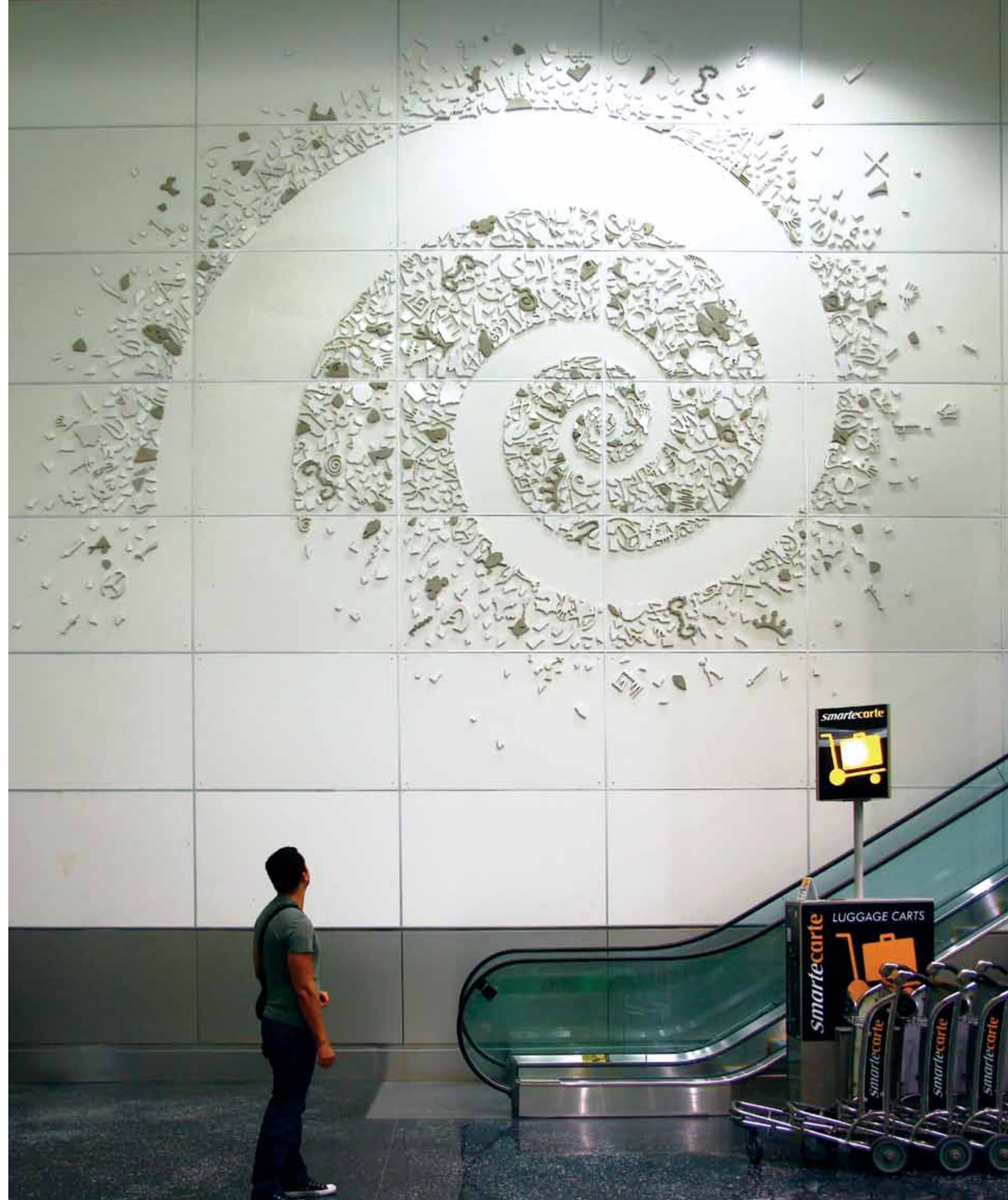




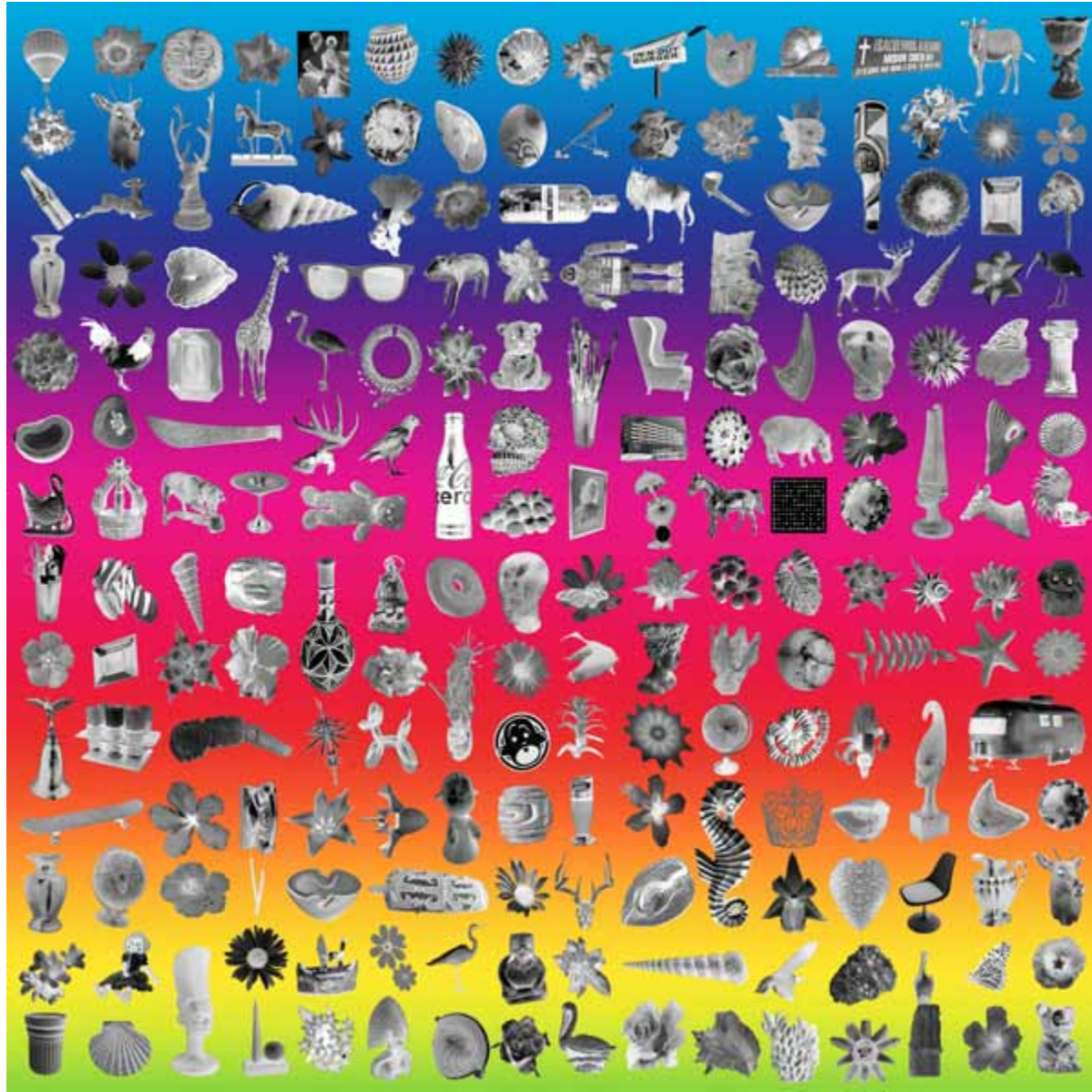


previous spread  
 Sound Symbols Project, 2000  
 Aerial view  
 Dimensions variable

opposite and above  
 About The Temporal And Universal Substance, 2009  
 Miami-Dade Art In Public Places commission  
 Stone, glass  
 Dimensions variable



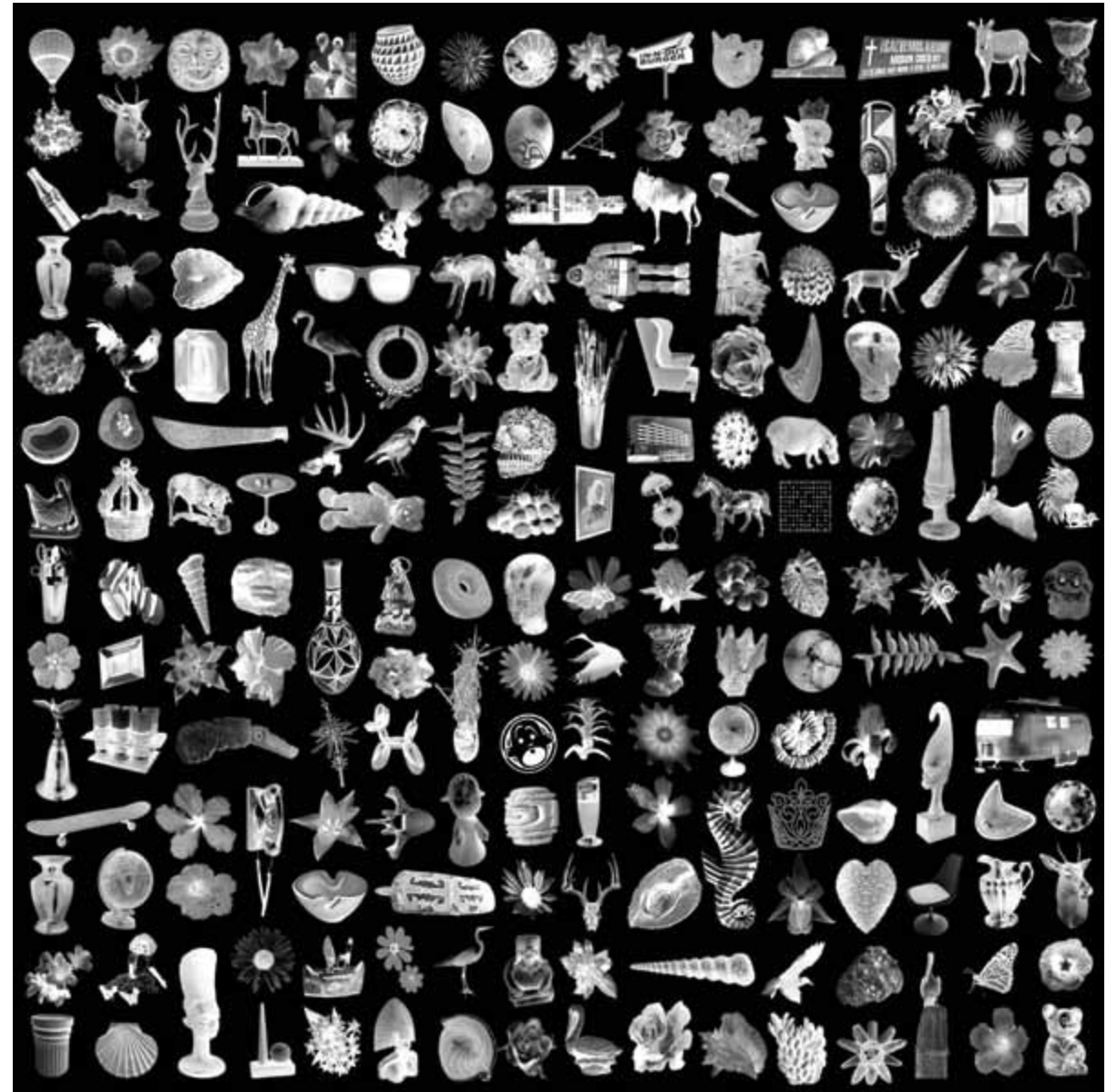
above  
Of Things Owned I, 2011  
Digital image on photographic paper  
72 x 72 in.



opposite  
Of Things Owned II, 2011  
Digital image on photographic paper  
72 x 72 in.

following spreads  
Of Things Owned III, 2011  
Pigmented inkjet print on paper  
48 x 80 in.

Untitled 1000 With Souvenirs, 2005  
(detail) Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach  
Pigmented inkjet print on vinyl  
324 x 288 in.





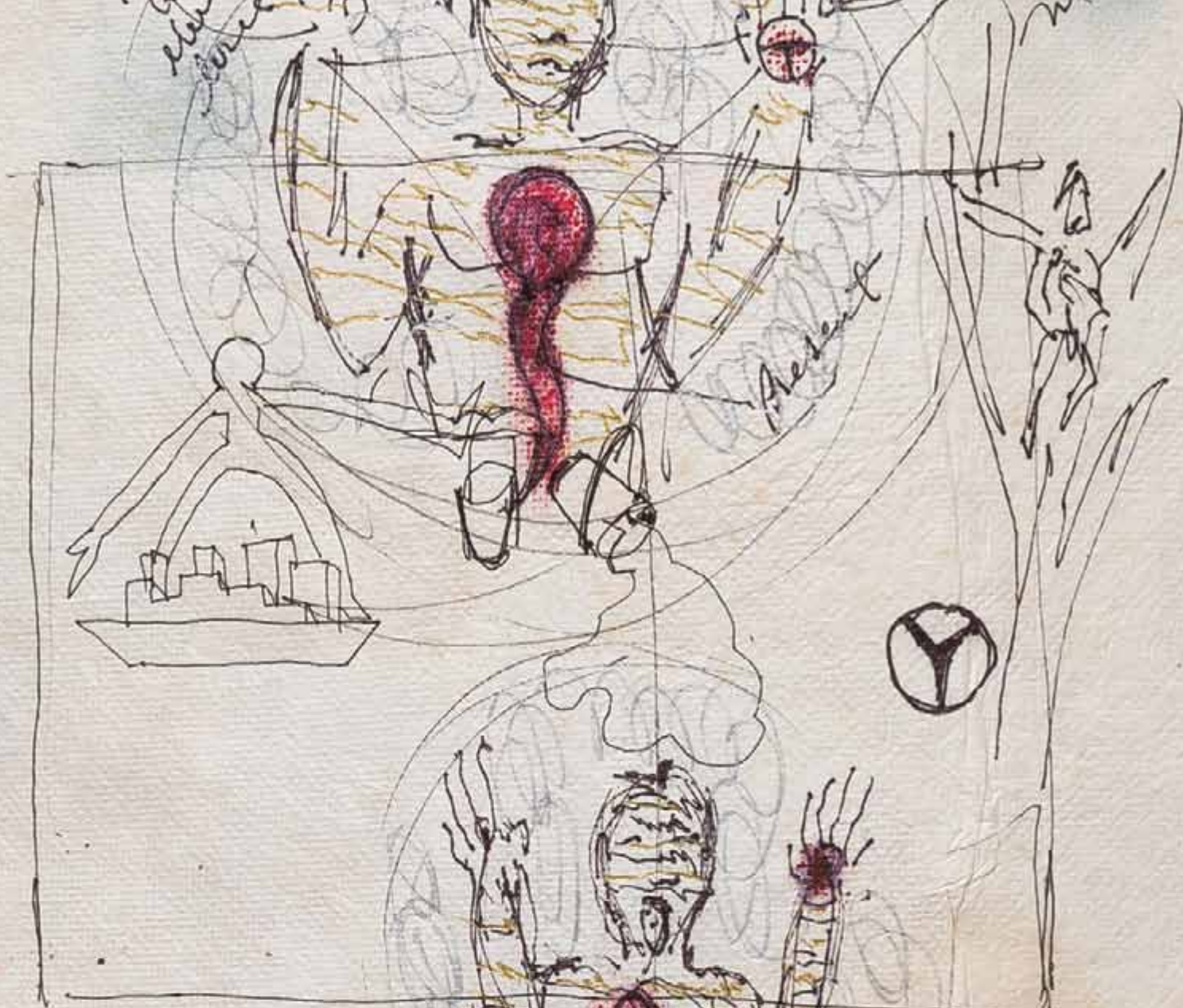












Hands on Body  
Backwards writing  
Lipstick  
en el pecho y nada  
in hands picture of grandma (symbol)  
one hand back (one forward)  
full body  
1/2 body  
thin glass  
on tongue  
machete





above  
Interventions in Nature III Series  
(By Mendieta's Ceiba)  
Yellow Blossoms , 2001  
Pigmented inkjet print vinyl  
145 x 120 in.

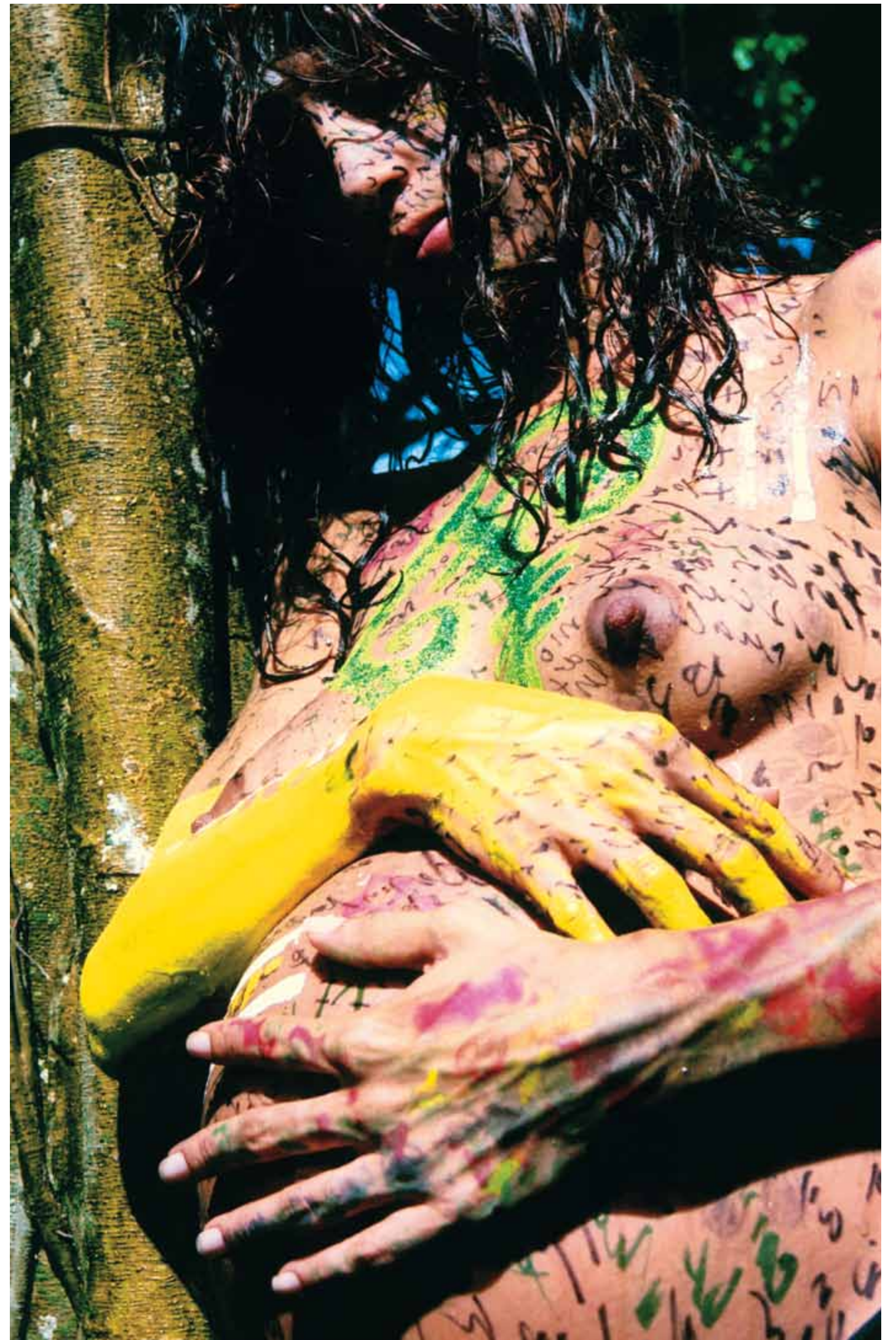


opposite  
Interventions in Nature Series  
What Are the Names of Your Brothers  
Caracaracol? 2001  
Pigmented inkjet print on vinyl  
84 x 57 in.

page 125:  
Self Portrait With Aracoel, 2001  
Pigmented inkjet print on vinyl  
159 x 130 in.

previous spread, left to right:  
Cosmic Rings, 1999-2000  
Color photograph  
30 x 20 in.

Photo Performance Syncretism, 1999  
Color Photograph  
30 x 20 in.







previous spread  
Interventions in Nature Series  
Royal Palm Trees For The Horizon, 2001  
Color photograph  
40 x 58 in.

opposite  
Tropical Cottage  
Muchas Manos, 2001  
Pigmented inkjet print on vinyl  
60 x 60 in.

above  
Interventions in Nature Series  
The Power Of Itiba Cahubaba, 2001  
Pigmented inkjet print on vinyl  
84 x 99 in.





ROBERT FARRIS THOMPSON

# TIMBA THE MEDICINE

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 approach isto 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, resulting in visual transmissions that are accurate and compelling. The more he mixes, the more you feel his mind.

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 painted outlines of hands on rock, 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 reminded 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 the signs. These icons of invocation are placed on a hushed field of mauve. Betancourt, speaking and drawing in 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—Teotihuacan, Miami, Cuba, Borinquen—there is a vague reminiscence of the site art of the seventies. 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 posed. So the ultimate code, in Betancourt's hand imagery, is touch.

This painting culminates with three hands in red, the "supreme presence of color", as Levi-Strauss put it in a memorable passage in *La Pensee 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 artists of the Franco-Cantabrian. But under their tutelage he took visual counsel, to signal to the future that we, too, were alive. 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 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 fusion 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 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 fusion with the fauna, the flora, and the mineral. Canvas turns to stone, co-presences turn to 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. The framing is Chinese in its sobriety. The artist takes just the right amount of

water, its blueness reading 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, Betancourt lives by other sources, San and Akan. Of special importance is an Akan motif, in the form of a fern, *aya*, meaning 'I trust in God, I fear no man'.

This is the motif Betancourt once light-projected on a certain leaf. The sign of a fern becomes medicine for our fears. At this point his



art swerves in two African directions, one obviously Akan, the other less so, 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* include an illustration of 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 also came to the Caribbean and continued in Cuba. 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 future.



# THE EYE OF THE SKY IS OPEN

The Yoruba of Nigeria have an idiom for good weather: The eye of the sky is open. This is the world of Carlos Betancourt, a world ruled by color, starting with blue, like Klein, like Matisse. Betancourt thinks cosmologically, too: The dome of the sky, the surge of the sea, and the straight-lined horizon are on his mind.

This aligns him with ancestral cultures, like the makers of the Nazca lines, or Ana Mendieta's fusion of body and landscape. This is an artist inspired by faraway epochs; sites and traditions where women and men paint on the canvas of the body, looking like worlds aflame with red pigment, alive with dotted signs of kinesis and majesty.

This is the way we meet him, body cropped artfully, hands offering an object, biceps and pectorals curving with strength, skin dressed in jolts of blue and gold pigment as if scratched by the forces of nature. This is his idea of a footnote, to pose at a spot near a constant influence, artist Ana Mendieta, once herself worked. He is holding in both hands a nest that had fallen from a tree in Little Havana, not far from where Mendieta had famously fashioned one of her silhouettes. With this nest he is offering an architecture of life, meant for small creatures who, like the soul of Mendieta, eventually took flight.

Betancourt's late colleague, Keith Haring, once said, "Primordial styles make you new." And he proved it with spaceships circling the pyramids. Betancourt, similarly, brings into consonance visions ancient and contemporary. Like the powerful silhouettes of Kara Walker, Carlos's work cries out for the wall, not the page. Caught in a catalogue, the sly promiscuities of Walker are

unduly spotlit by linear arrangements. This slows them down. But march them around the white walls of a gallery and aesthetics take over, putting the obscene in its place.

Carlos loves to pose without clothes. White butt on white page signals a narcissist. But consider the mural, "Worshipping of My Ancestors": five photographs of him bare-chested on a wall, body blazing lurid orange, pointing and signing in five different ways. By involving his body in a procession of gestures things get serious: He's following the path of ritual, taking us back to women and men who believed they had a responsibility for bringing back Spring with motion and gesture, for lighting up winter with candles on evergreens.

The ancient Peruvians were unafraid to use whole valleys as their canvas, making the famous lines of the Nazca. Betancourt lets a lagoon paint a backdrop for an ochre-marked, languorous portrait of his body. He reclines in a corner, gazing out at the water. One hand shows his heart, the other grasps a conch shell. Photography rules: cropping is all. The resulting one-corner composition recalls, to this art historian, a favored device of the painters of the Southern Sung.

Betancourt likes to work in series. In this way he is not so much portraying the rituals of Amerindian and Afro-Caribbean cultures, as casting them, like actors, in a vast photo-muralized show. An example: A thicket of trees frames the profile of a naked woman. Her breast is engorged, her nipple erect, and her belly protrudes with "the obstetric line", the curve of a woman come to full term. Thus framed, as if in an improvised altar hidden in the woods, he dramatizes her midriff as

a vessel for children, and her nipple as a spout for their nourishment. He is playing with raw nature but the intention is love. He is saying with photographed body art what Neruda said with words: I want to do with you what Spring does with cherry trees. In other words, he wants us to blossom, red, warm and hot.

Consider a photograph of an elegant woman with blue eyes whom he's covered with pink paint. She is the canvas but the canvas stares back. Betancourt is not so much painting his subject, then photographing her, as filming her portrait for dramatic projection on a huge slice of gallery space that serves as a screen.

Betancourt's oeuvre is peopled with echoes of native accomplishments—Taino, Lucumi, Afro-Puerto Rican— even those of the original Berber inhabitants of the Islas Canarias. He dreams of



their festivals, brilliant and fast. Constant immersion in the arts of native peoples sometimes allows their power to come over his work, making us live once again in their time. Take for instance a well-armed earthwork, showing a row of cavities dug into earth ritualized with white pigment. Each hole is glowing with bright fuschia paint. Arms carefully crossed, as if to ward off a force or a problem, a reclining figure places his head within one of these cavities. This strong composition lies in spiritual kinship with the famous outline of a hand with a line of red dots found in the prehistoric cave of Pech-Merle at Cabrerets in France. The dots are amazing. They pulse on the wall like the hearts of embryos, naked to our eyes, without a body to hide them. By means equally dramatic Betancourt involves us in a private ritual, aimed at something primordial and important, like the secret of life or the order of the world.

In the years closely following 2000, his work miraculously evolved, taking him through changes of style and location. For instance, out of the soil of Loiza Aldea, famed center for bomba dancing and other black traditions from Puerto Rico's north

coast, Betancourt in 2002 fashioned myriad little sculptures, unifying this series by painting them blue. Some of them read like fugitive pieces of jewelry, cut from turquoise. As he experimented with these forms he got bolder and bolder until finally he let them set sail in boat-like compositions moored on the floor of gallery space. They recall the floor compositions by Jose Bedia, in addition to works by Tony Cragg, the British sculptor and environment-maker. Onereads like a barge, laden with giant goblets, plates, and small vessels.

There is a great tradition of masks on Puerto Rico. Betancourt, who is Puerto Rican, plugs into that. There is a style of mask made from coconut shells, bristling with insertions of multiple horns. He played with this horned element until he got a sense of it: Masking is hiding. Suddenly he was



making his own kind of mask, binding strange forms to the front of the face, then photographing the result against fast-moving water and huge grayish stones.

This all serves as cultural preparation for Betancourt's exciting effort, "En la Arena Sabrosa II" a fleeting exhibition of thousands of miniature towers made from a combination of sand and glue arranged in a solid grid across the floor of the gallery rooms. "En la Arena Sabrosa II" slows you down, like rumble-treads guarding a fast-lane toll exit. Their bristling texture, their obsessive repetitiveness, take and compel us. They are making things happen across time and space. The whole installation was eventually erased by the artist.

The ephemeral nature of these ritual forms parallel other fleeting forms, like his neo-Puerto Rican masks; gleaming pools of fuschia in white earth; and even what might be termed a self-Pieta, where his body is draped not on Mary but on earth by water. Note that in the last-mentioned composition he holds at his midriff a pilgrim's white shell, a hint that he's constantly moving, leaving behind impermanent traces on the road to new work.

# ON THE ARTWORK OF CARLOS BETANCOURT

Start with his body. A recent self-presentation involves painting his face blue and his body warm red in "Apito y Cenizas with Letter to Alberto". Blue glitter and raw earth rest on his body. He considers the fingers of his left hand. The ashes of his grandmother are caught there.

Deepening a private ritual of remembrance, a painted-on ideograph with two spiral patterns emblazons his chest. The artist attributes the inspiration of this sign to the Hopi. In the iconography of Native American New Mexico and Arizona, spirals can symbolize breath, wind, and smoke. Farther south, in ancient Mexico, spiral-like scrolls, when drawn by the mouth, equal speech: a wind made of words. Signing his body with this powerful sign, the artist seems to invoke his grandmother's protection in a way that is very special and secret: Give us breath, give us life.

The artist relates the blue glitter on his chest to star dust or meteor debris. He is thinking of Kongo-Cuban mystic receptacles—prendas—opened in the night to absorb falling stars. He is mixing the ashes of his grandmother with glitter tinted blue, the color of heaven, the color that evil can't cross.

In another photograph, "Aracoel's Ashes or Watching the Maize in the Altiplano" the camera pulls back, revealing the artist's naked body. His grandmother's ashes now rest in his right hand. His nakedness emphasizes the seriousness of his ritual. Betancourt arranges his hands in two gestures, one to support traces of his ancestor, the other to display his body. The tension between ritual and narcissism adds intensity to the pose.

Betancourt knows that the body is the beginning of everything. The dawn of the image very

likely emerged on the frame of a woman or man. What Betancourt writes on the chest and arms are letters and messages in mirror-writing. Why would a Puerto Rican-Cuban-American be interested in writing this way? For one thing, he's aware of the role mirrors play among followers of palo, the creolized religion of Kongo in the Caribbean and Miami. Embedding mirrors in horns, as an eye to infinity, is one of the ways paleros seek vision. Horns with a mirror vitit menso, give eyes to their altars.

Betancourt, however, does not copy this tradition directly. He works with a mirror in his own private way. In "Self Portrait with Letter to Aracoel" he covers his body with a script to be read in a mirror. In Kongo belief, all things reverse as they pass into glory. Death is a negative. Betancourt writes to the other world backwards, in the terms of itsopic. As he does so, he brings back his grandmother's image. In a hand richly coated with the color of passion, he holds a small photograph showing her face when she was very young and unmarried.

The body-script unfolds handsomely. Like a rock artist in South Africa, using a curved wall to add motion and dimension to a frieze of wild elands, Betancourt takes cues from the shapes of the human figure. Words fill in pectorals like paragraphs. The curve of shoulders cause curved lines of writing to march down the back.

Script on his face takes on strange power. Somehow the letters flatten the features. We associate writing with the level plane of a page. So letters overmaster the nose, eyes, and eyebrows, as if a pane of pure glass, overwritten with writing, were masking or obliterating his identity.



Derrida was referring to more than he knew when he talked about the "violence of the letter."

The mask of letters returns in "Lily, Obatala' y Chichecastanango" where the eyes of a man, (Alberto LaTorre, Miami), emerge in dense script. An elegant ideograph, which the artist relates to the rain, cuts down from the subject's neck to his shoulders, truncating the lines of his body. Mirror writing here is intended as a communication to Obatala', the Yoruba god of creativity and justice, "he who turns blood into children."

We come now to an ultimate mirror: the Atlantic Ocean, a mass liquid glass that extends to the edge of our continent. Betancourt plays with this splendor. Engagement with surf leads to various works. In "Untitled (Intersection)" a photograph reveals the subject on his back on a beach. A wave crashes over his body. Note the slight wince, as salt and cold water slap his face. The edge of the water becomes a garment of foam.

"Daca Bagua" mounts a frieze of seven photographs, seven takes of his face being hit by the sea. Foam crowns his head and water pulls his hair into filaments. The artist is passive. He lets water work him.

In "Message to Caguana" a man, (Richard Blanco, Connecticut), rests on dry sand, at the top of a beach, facing down. Small tortoise claws rest on his back. The tortoise is an attribute of Caguana, the Taino goddess who created mankind. The poet's broad back becomes a page for



a prayer. Black lines of writing match the lines of his hair. The letters are mysterious. Numerals - 4, 5, 6, 7 - appear backwards. They're mysterious too. A hard, breathing body provides, one more time, a ground for a coded communication to a spirit. Deft cropping emphasizes the arms of the poet. It's as if he were embracing the earth. Finally, wave-like strong lines of prominent writing encircle his biceps and emphasize the ridge of his shoulders.

Working with body-script, viewed on the sand of a beach, leads to an exciting development. On the night of the equinox, March 19, 2000, Betancourt signed an entire beach with an ideograph. Like Serpent Mound in Ohio, or Nazca lines of Peru, his earthwork, "Sounds Symbols Project", is meant to be read from above.

The ideograph has a circular head, three bars as a chest, and legs that curl out like a tail. The figure, however enigmatic, is clearly celebratory.



The construction entailed some two thousand five hundred African and Taino-like patterns carved out of wood, painted gleaming black, set on two, three and four inch stilts in the sand, creating different planes. A jovial team, wearing T-shirts printed with the ideograph, followed Betancourt's specifications. They set up thousands of miniature sculptures in the sand within clearly marked-out areas and when they were done the ideograph was complete.

Three hundred feet long, the earthwork ran parallel to the beach opposite 21st Street in Miami Beach. Miami art enthusiasts celebrated this work as the first major project since Christo's "Surrounded Islands". "Sound Symbols Project" was popular.

Malraux wrote in *The Voices of Silence* that art leaves us nothing but irreconcilable fragments. This is a council of defeat, postmodernist before its time. Betancourt, with hard work, and openness to experience, will give us an antidote. He will reconcile the irreconcilable. How, please? Because he is willing to listen to all sides of an argument. In the many-languaged nature of his work, he is arguing, like Bedia and Mendieta before him, for the equal potency of the Caribbean and the West.

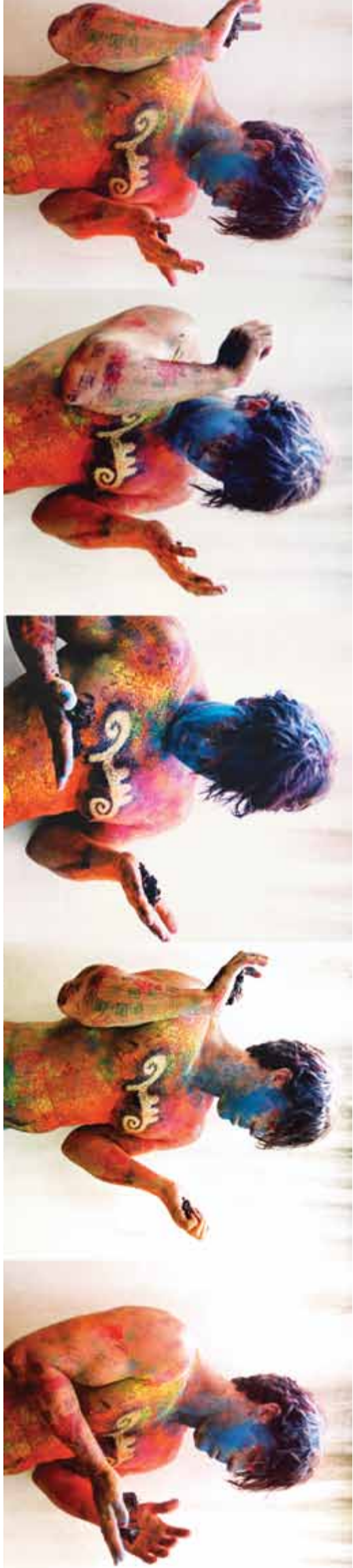


pages 134–135  
Interventions in Hobe Sound, Jupiter Island  
Oubao-Moin or RI, 2001  
Pigmented inkjet print on vinyl  
48 x 72 in.



opposite  
Worshipping of my Ancestors Series  
Think Ahead Love Eye, 2001  
Pigmented inkjet print on vinyl  
65 x 48 in.

above  
Worshipping of my Ancestors Series  
Watching The Maize In The Altiplano, 2001  
Color photograph  
Pigmented inkjet print on vinyl  
57.5 x 36.5 in.

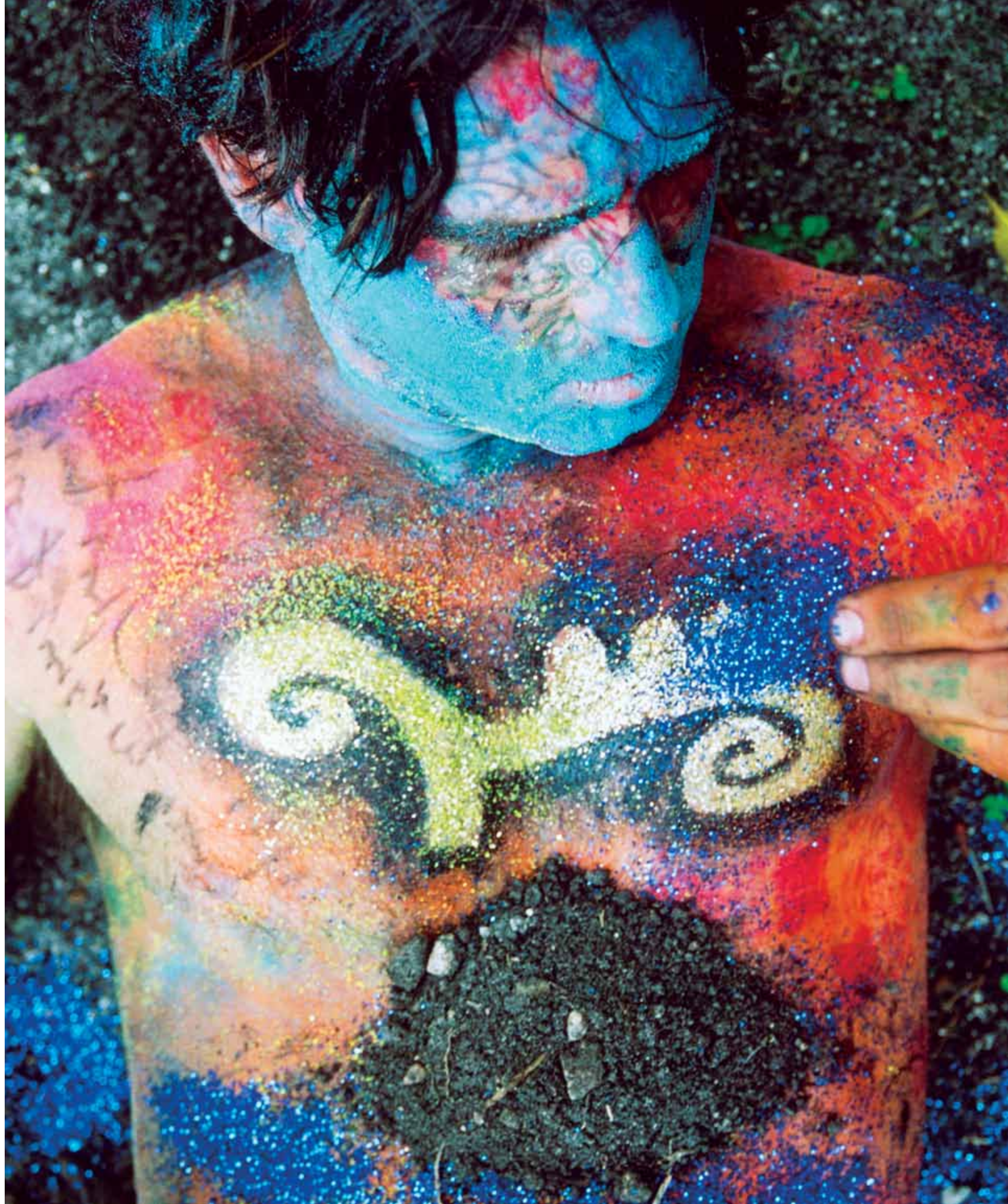


opposite  
 Worshipping of My Ancestors Series  
 Apito y Cenizas With Letter To Alberto, 2001  
 Pigmented inkjet print on vinyl  
 84 x 74 in.

right  
 The Worshipping of My Ancestors, 2001  
 Pigmented inkjet print on vinyl  
 60 x 180 in.

following spreads  
 Interventions in Nature VI Series, Blanco  
 The Vague Year, 2001  
 Color photograph  
 64 x 37 in.

Interventions in Nature VI Series  
 Portrait of a Dream, (R. Blanco) 2001  
 Pigmented inkjet on vinyl  
 48 x 70 in.









top  
After September  
Untitled, (agua y arena), 2002  
Color photograph  
30 x 30 in.

bottom  
After September  
Untitled, (cara roja), 2002  
Pigmented inkjet on vinyl  
156 x 156 in.

opposite  
After September 4-2002  
Untitled, (con amarillo)  
Pigmented inkjet on vinyl  
119 x 80 in





left  
Coupon Key Series  
Bobs Storm, (Robert Miller) 2003  
Color photograph  
20 x 29 in.

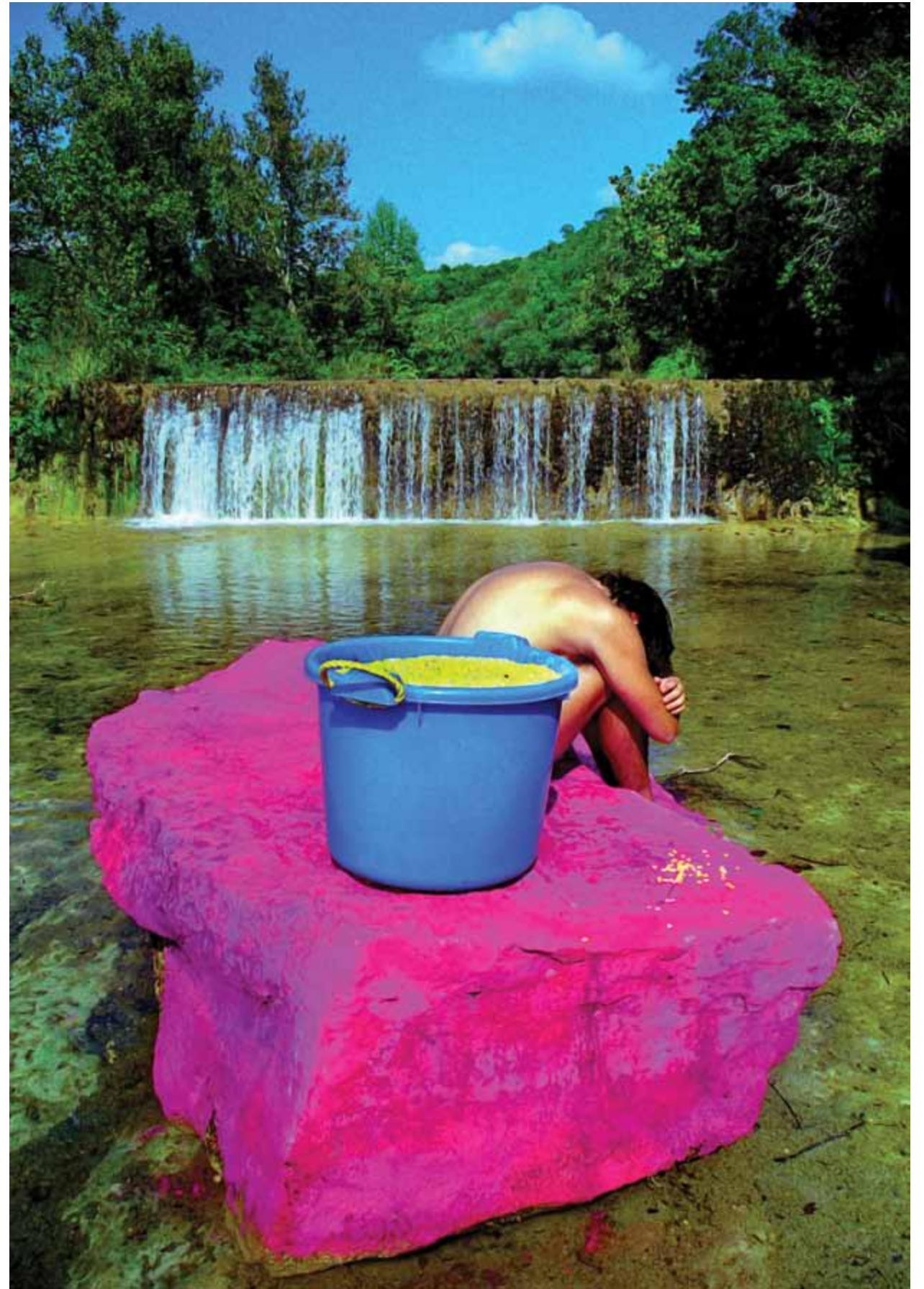
following page  
Interventions in San Antonio  
Untitled ( for Rudy and Chris, Gallagher Ranch), 2003  
Pigmented inkjet print on vinyl  
72 x 50 in.

pages 154-155  
Sketchbook Collage With Sweetarts, 1995-2014





Chaboyer Rancho  
San Antonio Texas





**HYPERSPAC**  
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Dario Macola & Assoc  
Miami Mac 11 3 39

**CRAIG COLEMAN**  
(305) 673-1141

Manager  
Royal Hotel

DEC  
31  
198



2 - sideways - confused

prestige



\$ here is sword



PELIKED Hopi migration Travel people

strength from leopard prints - Turkey

life life VIDA

eye, look OJO MIRA "ete" - mikasuki language

Florida Miami MIAMI African simple

eternity number migration lake Jackson

'Daca' (Taino) present

letter vowel (Ii)

movement past-future (YABISI TAINO TREE) light - SON

"cora" harmony (Sun moon) ABUELA/ANCESTORS

Sex/male/female multi-cultural communication

akon escape fear none

power/letter flight

left hand create

TOUCH SEX "touch eye"

letter (C) - communication (telephone)

African - ? contrast

DISAGREE

tree (Semi) (Semi) (Semi)

Pompeii (Roman empire) (Mystery) fertility

horse (Semi) men in horse

MAIZE FOOD COMIDA

Smoke tower continuation of course BAD MATERIALISM

Magic Feather (Back eastern) FE EU NY, New York

TRADITION

particular Mcc. Semivole - Four directions (medicine colors)

wolf animal

(2)



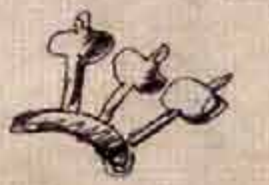
@ - new



love falling leaf



Black white red yellow

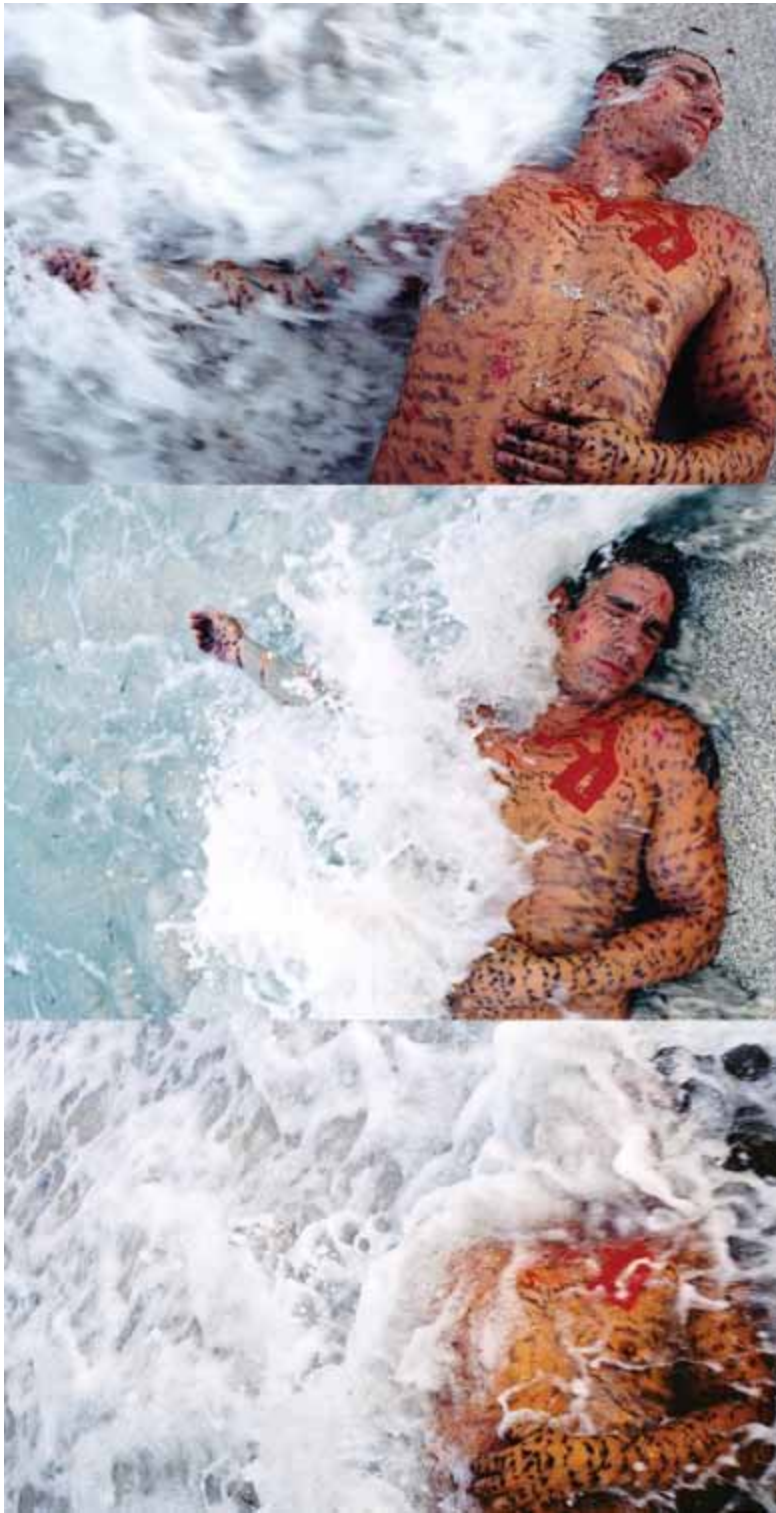




above  
 Intervention in Nature Series I  
 Daca Bagua, 2001  
 Pigmented inkjet print on vinyl  
 60 x 180 in.

following spread  
 Intervention in Nature Series I  
 Daca Bagua, 2001  
 (detail)





above  
Interventions in Nature VI Series  
Intersection, 2001-02  
Pigmented inkjet print on vinyl  
144 x 72 in.

opposite  
Interventions in Nature VI Series  
Coloquenme Un Amuleto Bajo La Frente, 2001-02  
Pigmented inkjet print on vinyl  
60 x 40 in

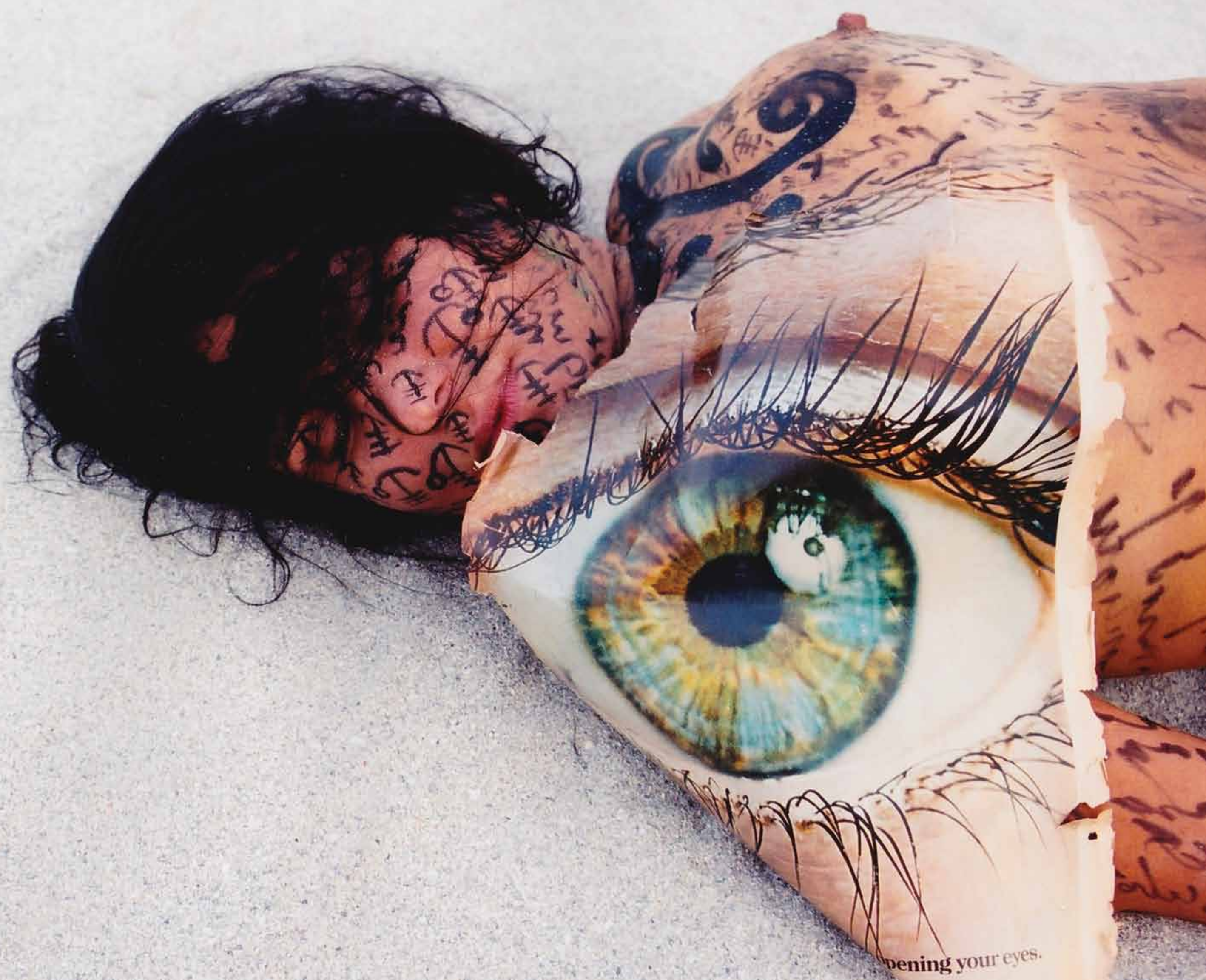


...titud se concentra en una calle de La Habana Vieja alrededor de una enorme balsa, que  
...re paso lentamente sobre la cama de un camión hacia una playa del este de la capital cubana.  
Los futuros viajeros planeaban zarpar rumbo a Estados Unidos.



above  
Exhibition Carlos Betancourt at  
Robert Miller Gallery, NYC, 2002

opposite  
Interventions in Nature VI Series  
Magic City, 2001  
Pigmented inkjet print on vinyl  
132 x 156 in.



opening your eyes.





previous spread  
Interventions in Nature IV Series  
Castro In Triumphant Advance To Havana, 2001  
Pigmented inkjet on vinyl  
132 x 156 in.

opposite  
Interventions in Nature IV Series  
Anaforuana Con Carta A Caonabo, 2001  
Pigmented inkjet on vinyl  
84 x 51 in.

right  
Interventions with Aracoel's Objects, 2002-2015  
Paint, glitter, collected objects, soil  
Dimensions variable





Assemblages of Things Past:  
How Much I Love You I, 2012  
Paint, epoxy resin, collected objects  
54 x 24 x 19 in.

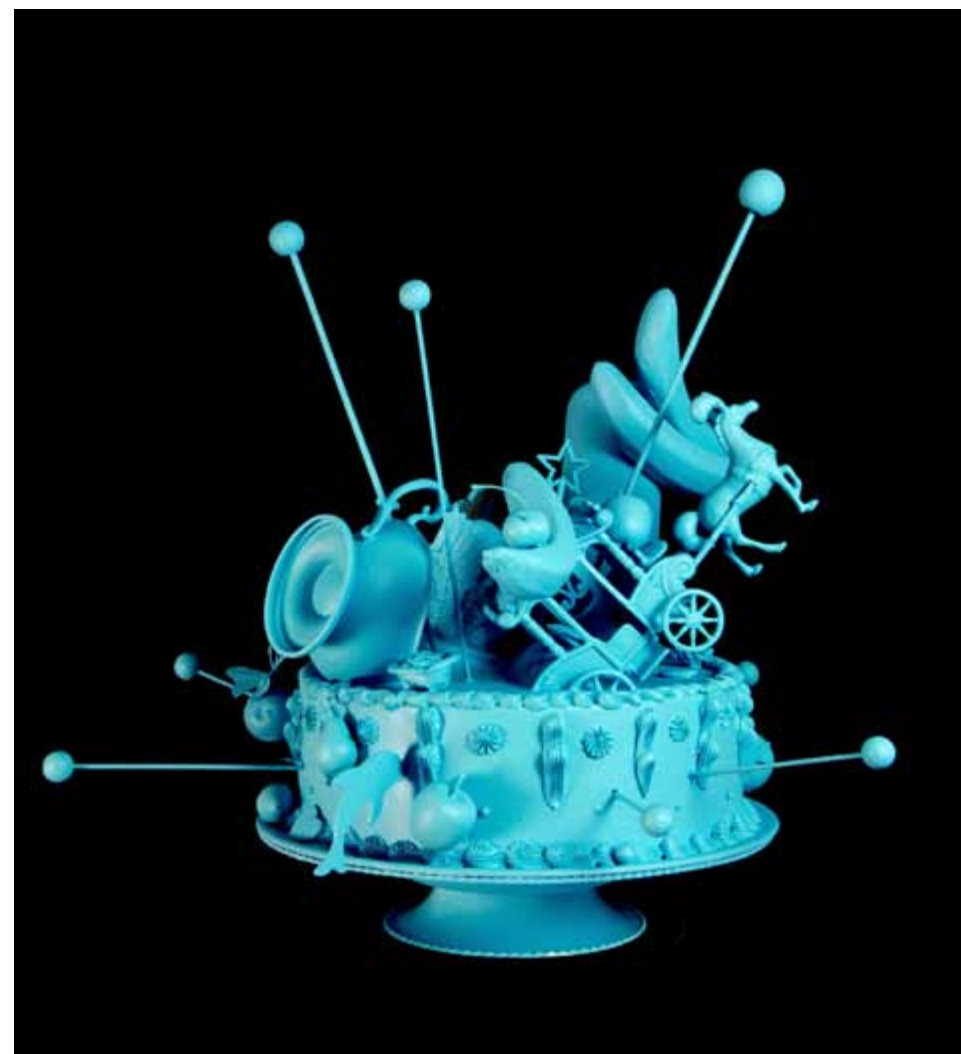
opposite  
Assemblages of Things Past:  
How Much I Love You II, 2012  
Paint, epoxy resin, collected objects  
27 x 20 x 20 in.





spread  
Portrait of a Garden, 2011  
Bronze, patina  
45 x 16 x 18 in.



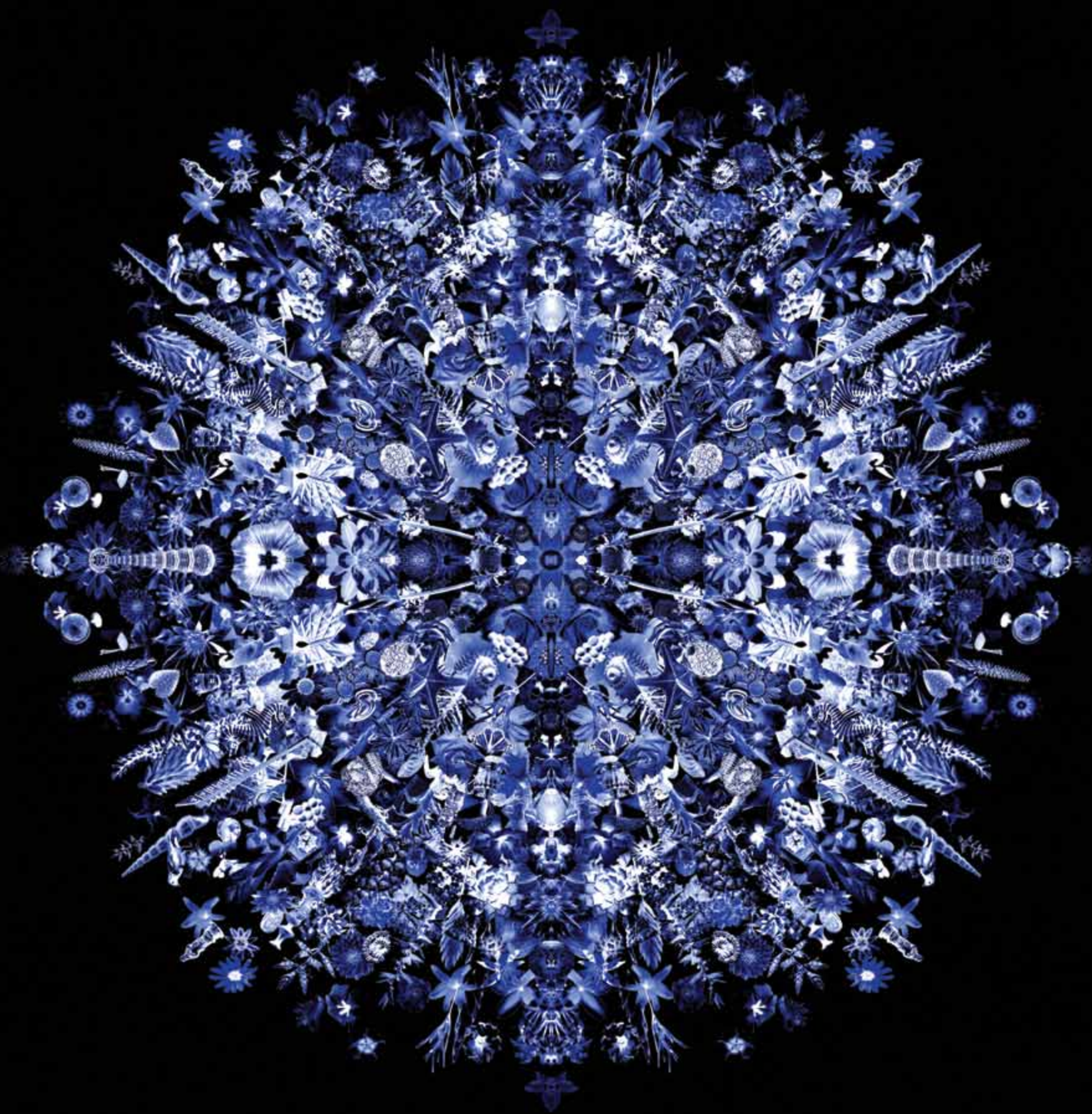
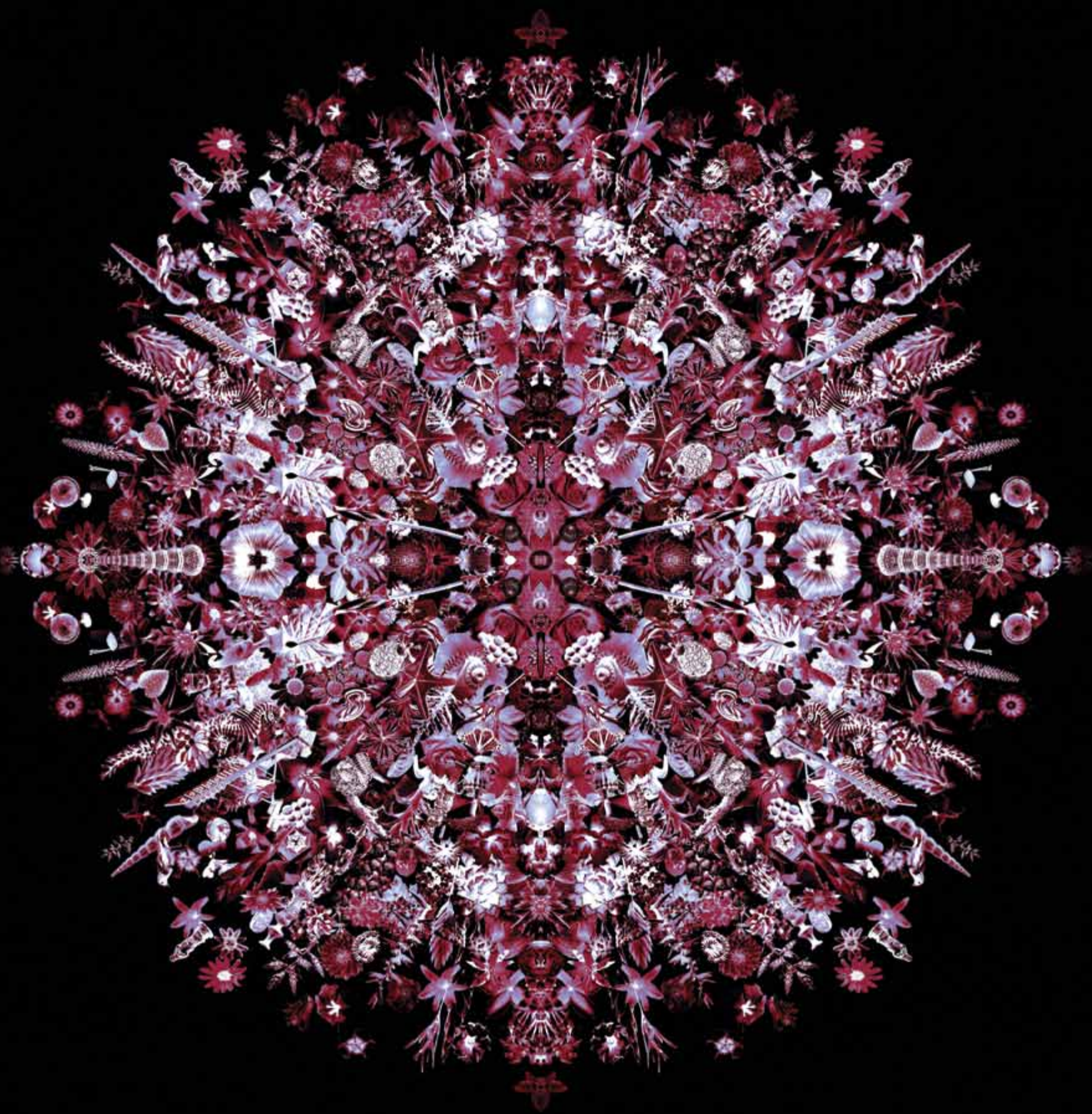




following spread, left to right  
 Re-Collections XVI (vino) 2011  
 Digital image on photographic paper  
 72 x 72 in

Re-Collections XVI (azul) 2011  
 Digital image on photographic paper  
 72 x 72 in

opposite  
 Shopping Cart Atomic, 2011  
 Paint, epoxy resin, collected objects  
 76 x 48 x 48 in.

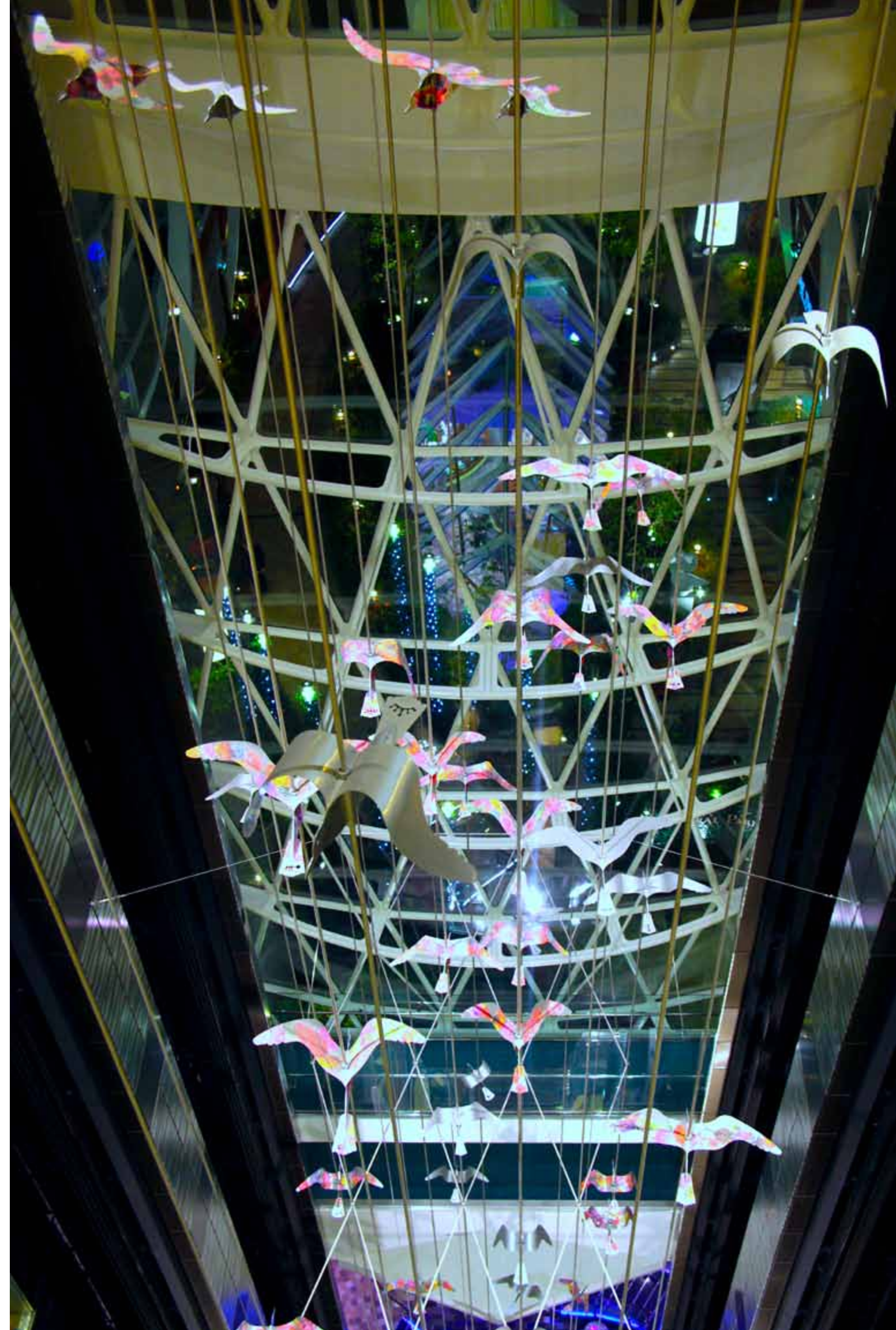




spread  
A Flock of Seagulls, 2008-09  
Site specific commission with Alberto Latorre  
Aluminum, stainless steel, inkjet prints

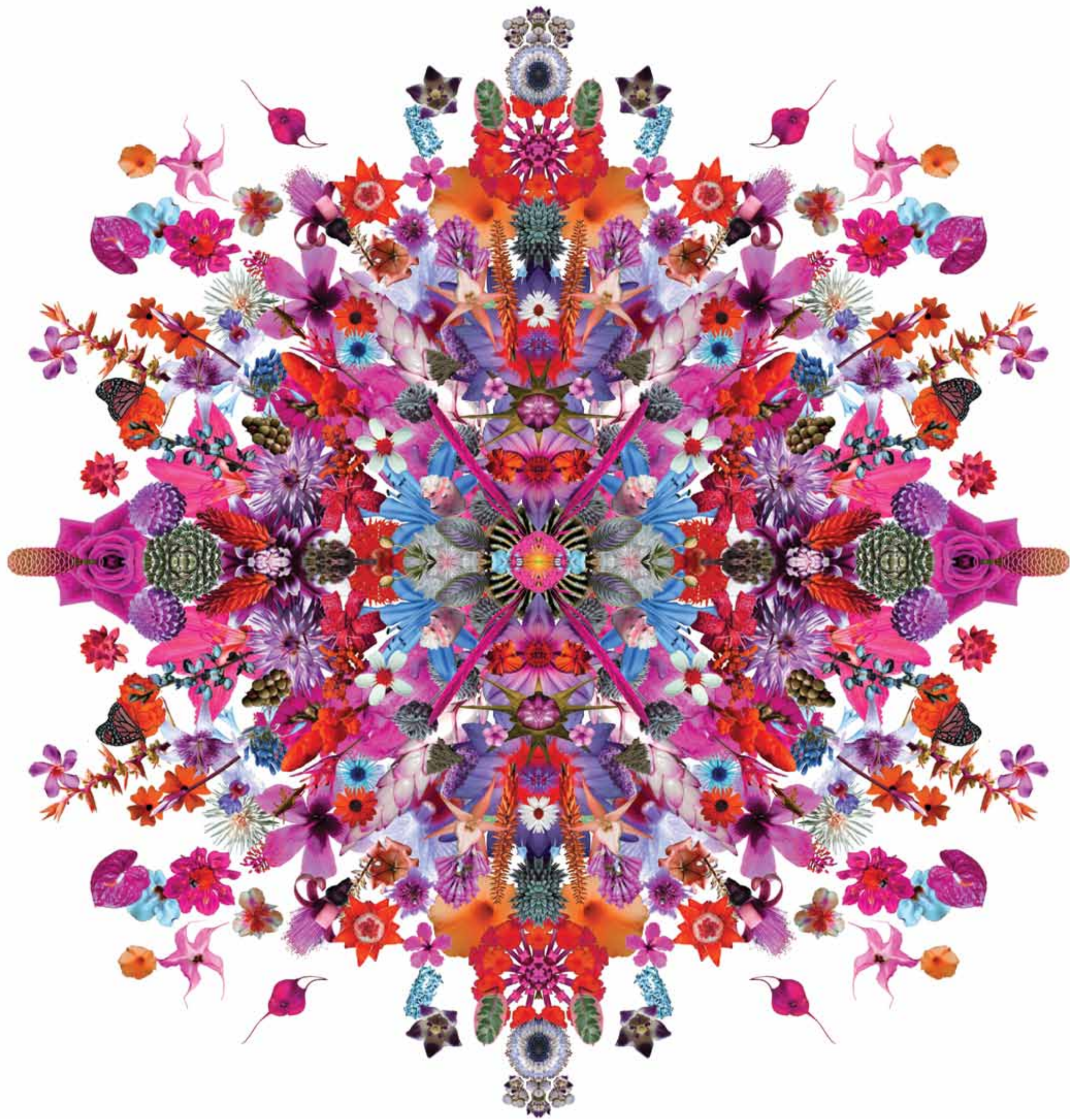
following spreads  
Re-Collections X, rojos, 2010  
(detail)

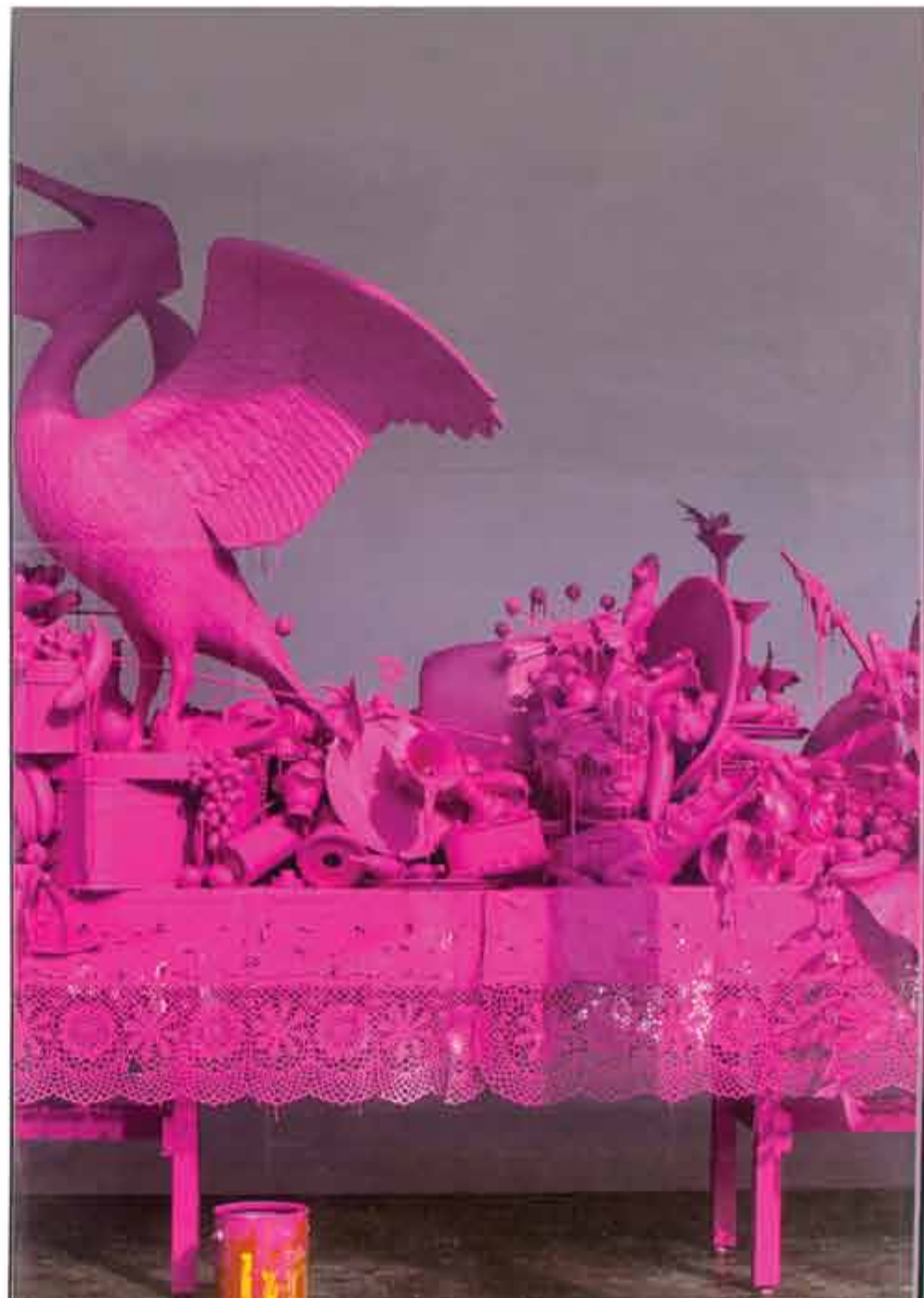
Re-Collections X, rojos, 2010  
Digital image on photographic paper  
72 x 72 in.











Let Them Feel Pink, 2012  
Paint, epoxy resin, collected objects  
82 x 324 x 36 in.

following spread  
Let Them Feel Pink, 2012  
(detail)





Let Them Feel Pink With Cake, La Silla, 2012  
 Paint, epoxy resin, collected objects, plaster, wood  
 41 x 24 x 27 in

opposite  
 Assemblages  
 Faith, 1992  
 Paint, collected objects, wood  
 50 x 36 x 11 in.



Portrait of a Garden Installation, 2009  
(detail)

following spread  
Portrait of a Garden Installation, 2009  
(with Alberto Latorre)  
Collected objects, paint  
Dimensions variable







opposite  
Re-Collections I, (seashells and guns) 2005  
(for Félix González Torres)  
Paint, glitter, seashells, plastic toys,  
plastic flowers  
Dimensions variable



top  
 Appropriations Porno I, 2010  
 Pigmented inkjet print on paper  
 32 x 40 in.

above  
 Of Kenya and Candies V, 2010  
 Pigmented inkjet on canvas  
 56 x 56 in

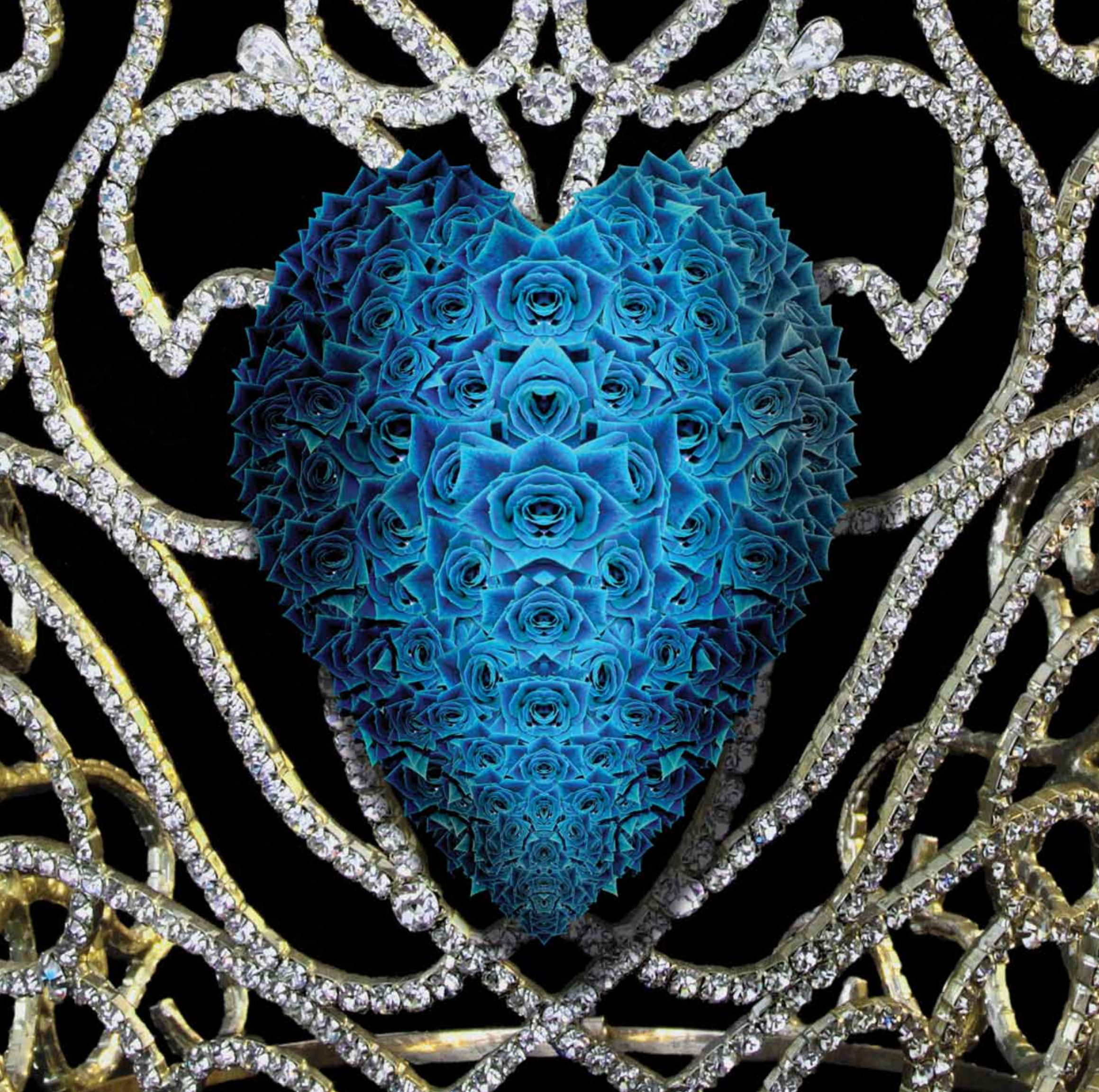
opposite  
 Of Kenya and Candies III, 2010  
 Pigmented inkjet on canvas  
 56 x 56 in











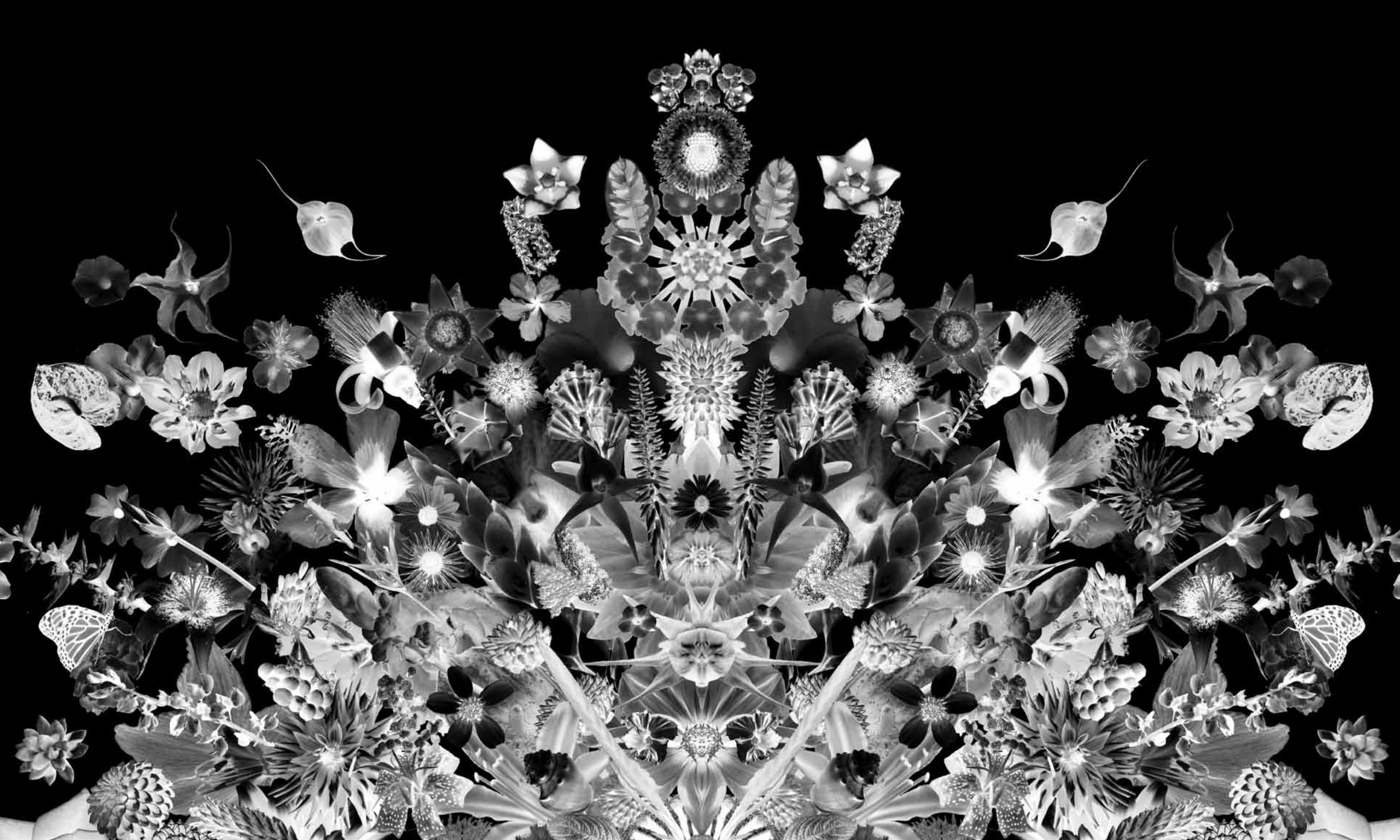
following spread  
Of Crowns and Journeys II, 2010  
Pigmented inkjet print on paper  
48 x 48 in.



above  
Of Crowns and Journeys Kenya, 2010  
Pigmented inkjet print on paper  
44 x 44 in.

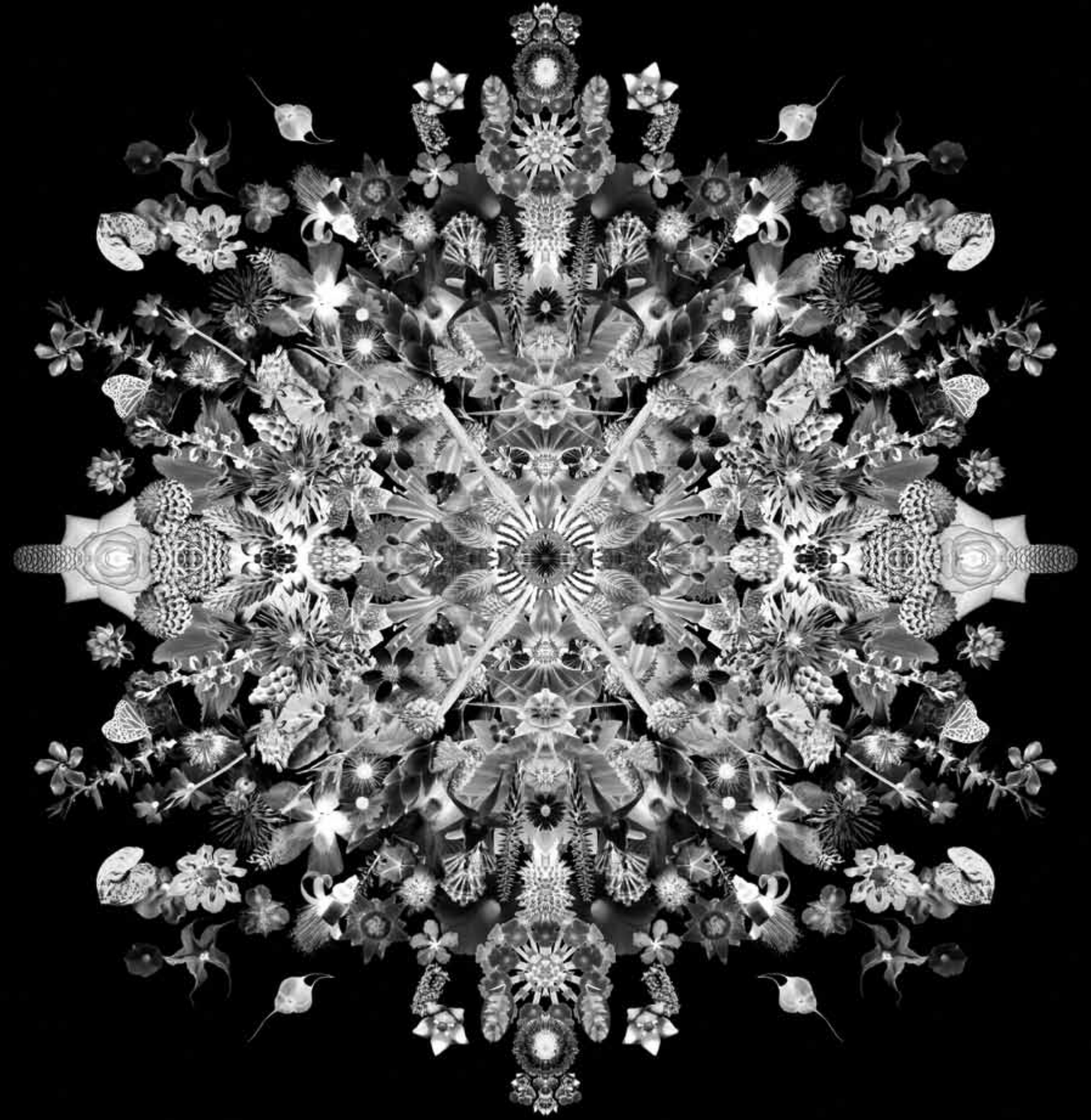
following spread  
Of Kenya and Candies, 2010  
pigmented inkjet wallpaper mural  
480 x 94 in.







above  
Of Crowns and Journeys I, 2010  
Pigmented inkjet print on paper  
48 x 48 in.



opposite  
Re-Collections X-Ray, 2010  
Digital image on photographic paper  
72 x 72 in.

previous spread  
Re-Collections X-Ray, 2010  
(detail)



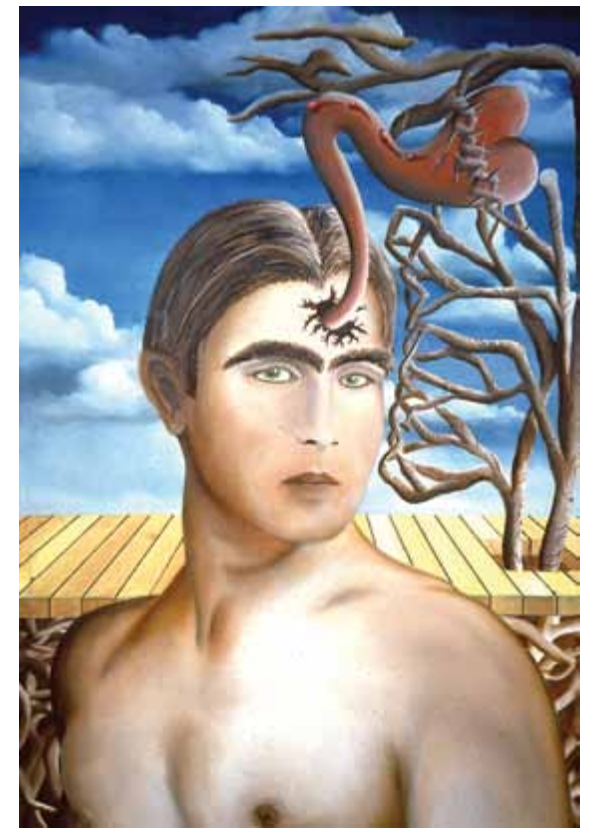
top  
Interventions in Wynwood II  
The Mockingbird, 2003  
Digital image on photographic paper  
33.5 x 35.5 in.



bottom  
Munny with Machete, 2007  
Paint, glitter, vinyl, machete, crown  
24 x 17 x 17 in.

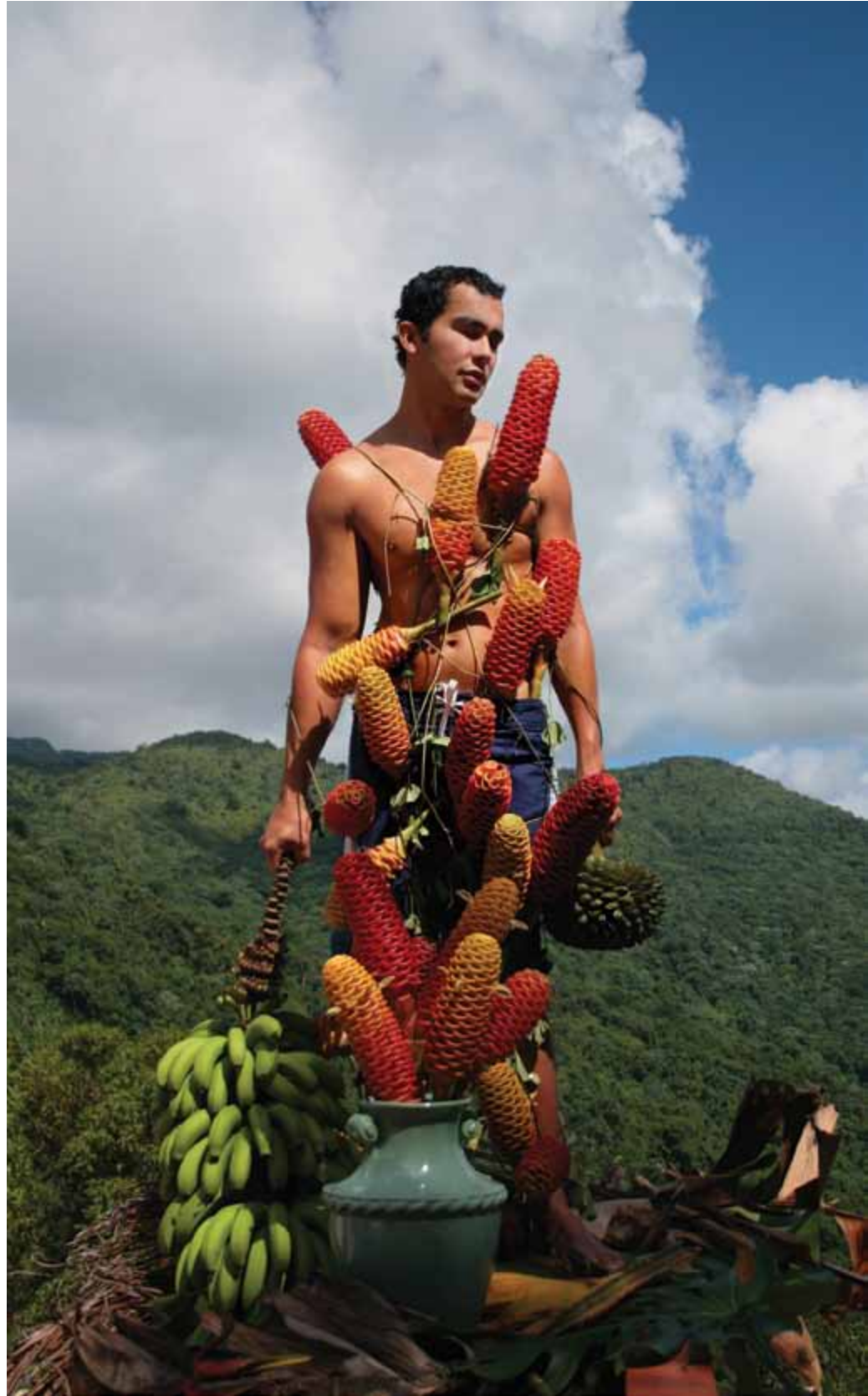


top row commencing on the left  
Sophie li, 2010  
Alexandra Gregg, Jupiter Island, 2002  
After September, Myrna, Miami Beach, 2002  
Ana Mendieta, 1995



top row commencing on the left  
Bunny Yeager I, 2013  
Jennifer Johnson, Jupiter Island, 2014  
Jose Diaz, Miami, 2007  
Self-Portrait As Frida-Carlos, 1995





opposite  
 The Enchanted Garden III, 2010  
 Pigmented inkjet print on paper  
 46 x 33 in.

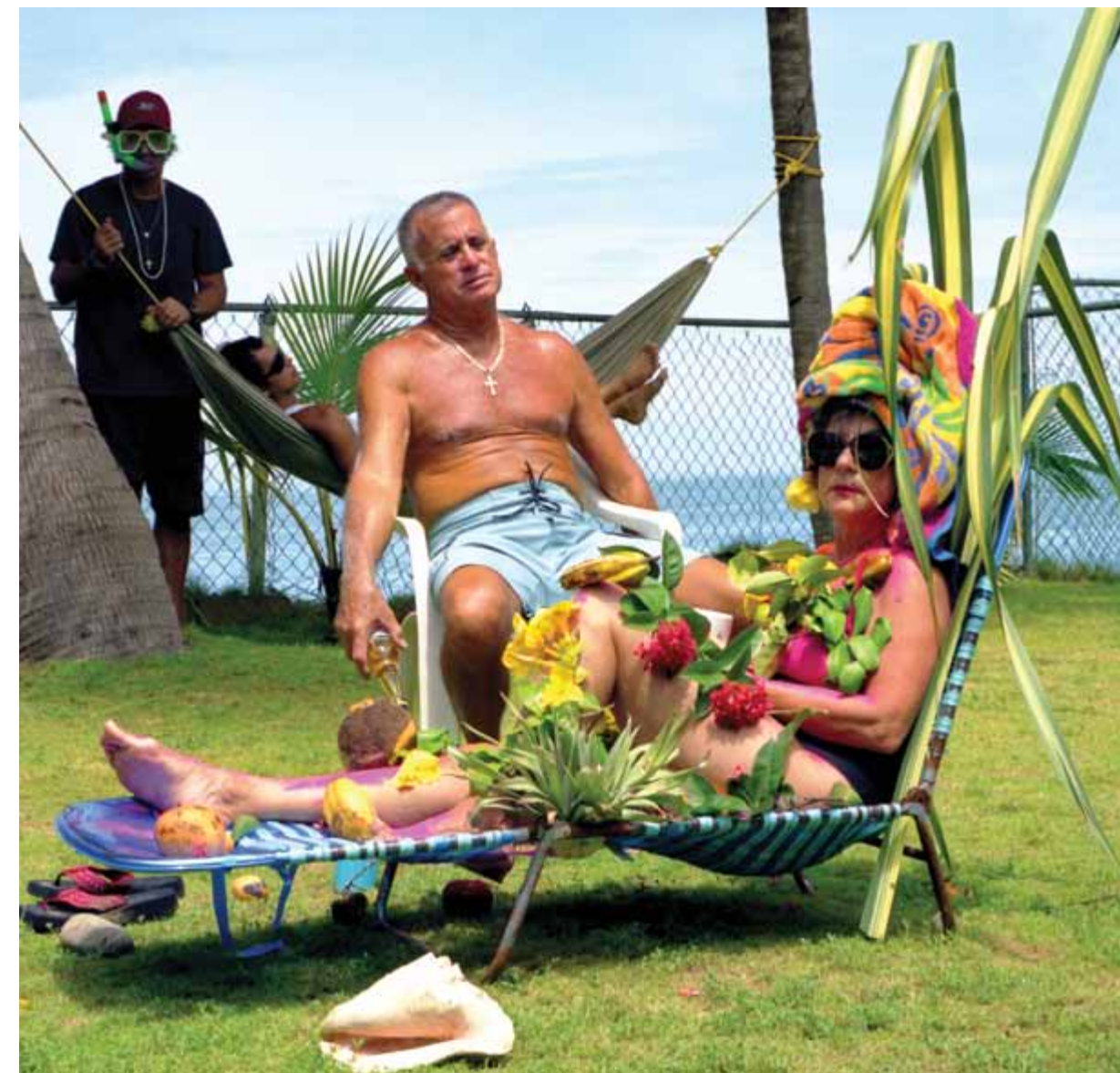


above  
 Sunday Afternoon in El Yunque, 2008  
 Digital image on photographic paper  
 49 x 32 in.





previous spread  
 The Enchanted Garden II, 2010  
 Digital image on photographic paper  
 25 x 34 in.



opposite  
 Rincon, Flamboyant Series  
 Portrait of a Dream VII, 2005  
 Color photograph  
 18.5 x 14 in.

above  
 Family Portrait: Mami, Papi And Alberto  
 Color photograph  
 48 x 48 in.

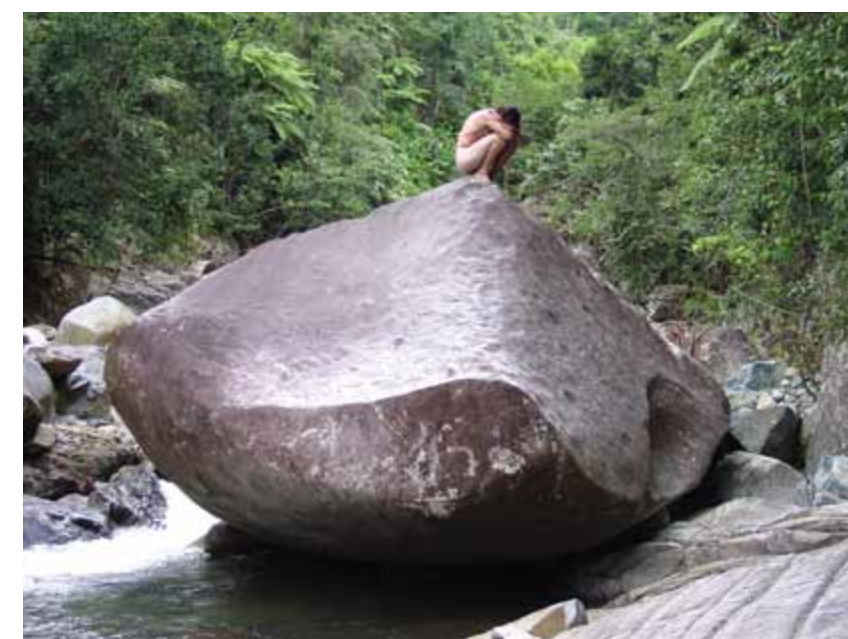


opposite  
(in El Yunque property), 2014

top to bottom  
Vieques and Rincon Series:  
Three Pointer En El Rio Blanco,  
2002  
color photograph  
19 x 28.5

Petroglyphs and Surfer Shorts  
En El Rio Blanco, 2003  
Color photograph  
20 x 24 in.

Top of The Three Pointer, 2004  
Color photograph  
20 x 24 in.





Back Stories at Hobe Sound (K), 2004  
Large format Polaroid  
36 x 24 in

opposite  
Back Stories at Hobe Sound (U), 2004  
Large format Polaroid  
36 x 24 in



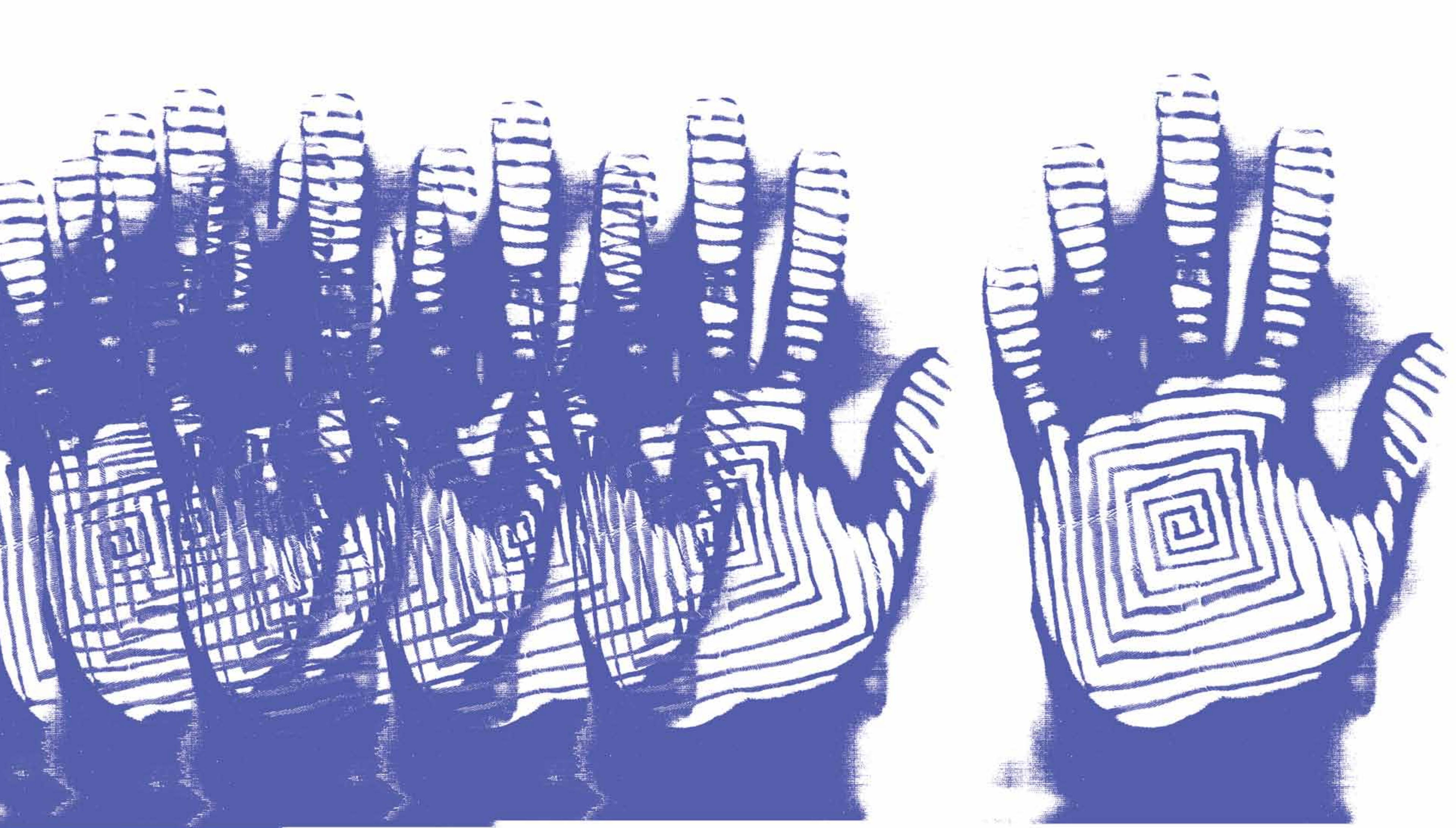


Back Stories at Hobe Sound (T), 2004  
Large format Polaroid  
36 x 24 in.

opposite  
after Jennifer Johnson and Bruce Dempsey  
Back Stories At Hobe Sound (Q), 2004  
Large format Polaroid  
36 x 24 in.











# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is dedicated to Alberto Latorre, el amor de mi vida. Thank you for sharing your insight, patience, and talents; collaborating with you is the most beautiful love. Gracias a la naturaleza, a Dios. Muchas gracias to my familia, my brothers Kike and Alex. And especially my late grandmother Coralia, my father Enrique, and my mother Teresa – her instinct to document and share in photo albums our sometimes challenging journey of survival and triumph, loaded with a sense of humor, continues to inspire me and adds meaning to my life.

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# COPYRIGHT TK

cover:  
Letter to Aracoel Series:  
Self-Portrait With Letter To Bartolome  
De Las Casas 2001  
After Arnaldo Roche We Have to Dream  
in Blue  
Pigmented inkjet print on vinyl  
156 x 144 in.-

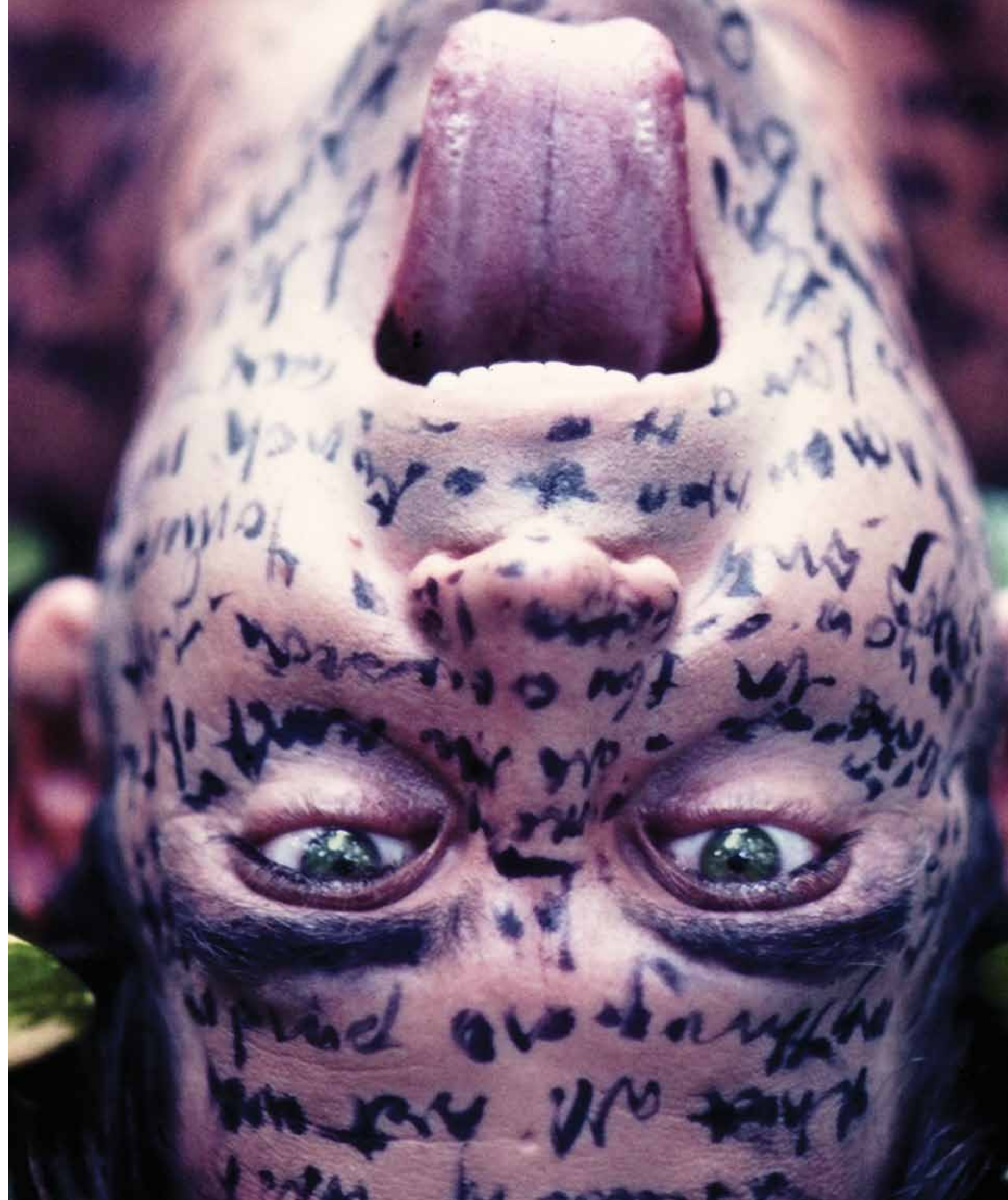
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endpaper 2 (verso)  
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156 x 144 in.  
frontispiece  
En La Arena Sabrosa li 12-04  
(installation detail)

endpaper 3 (recto)  
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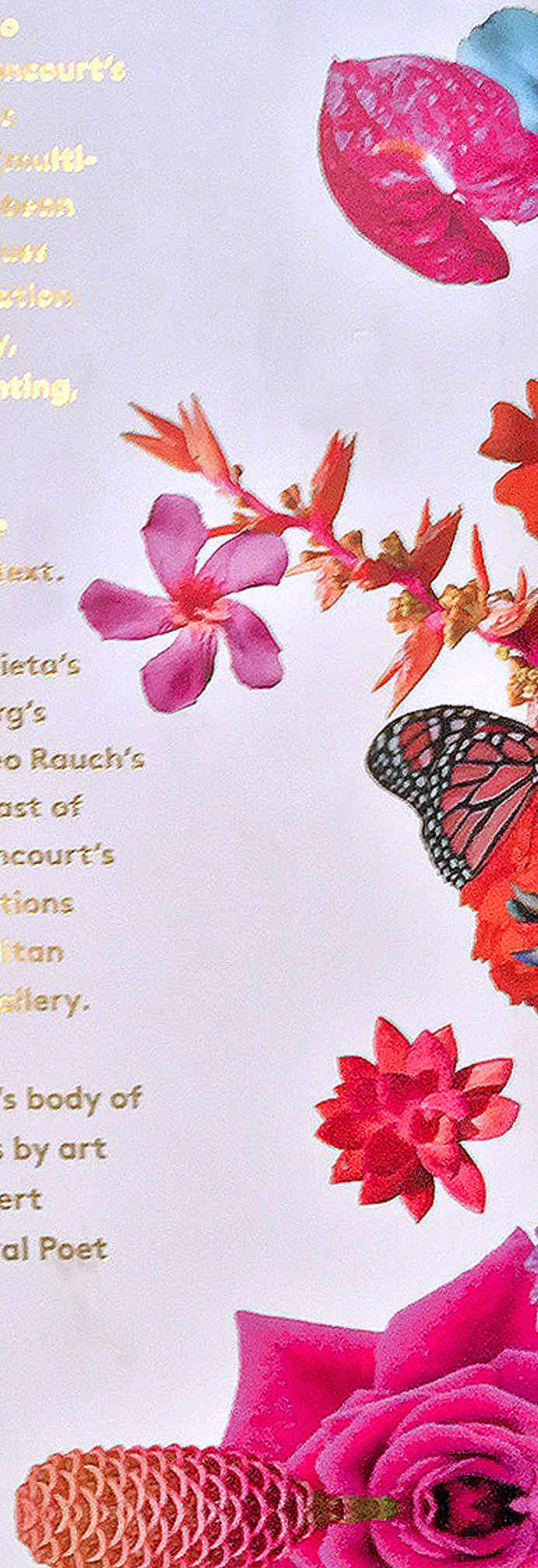


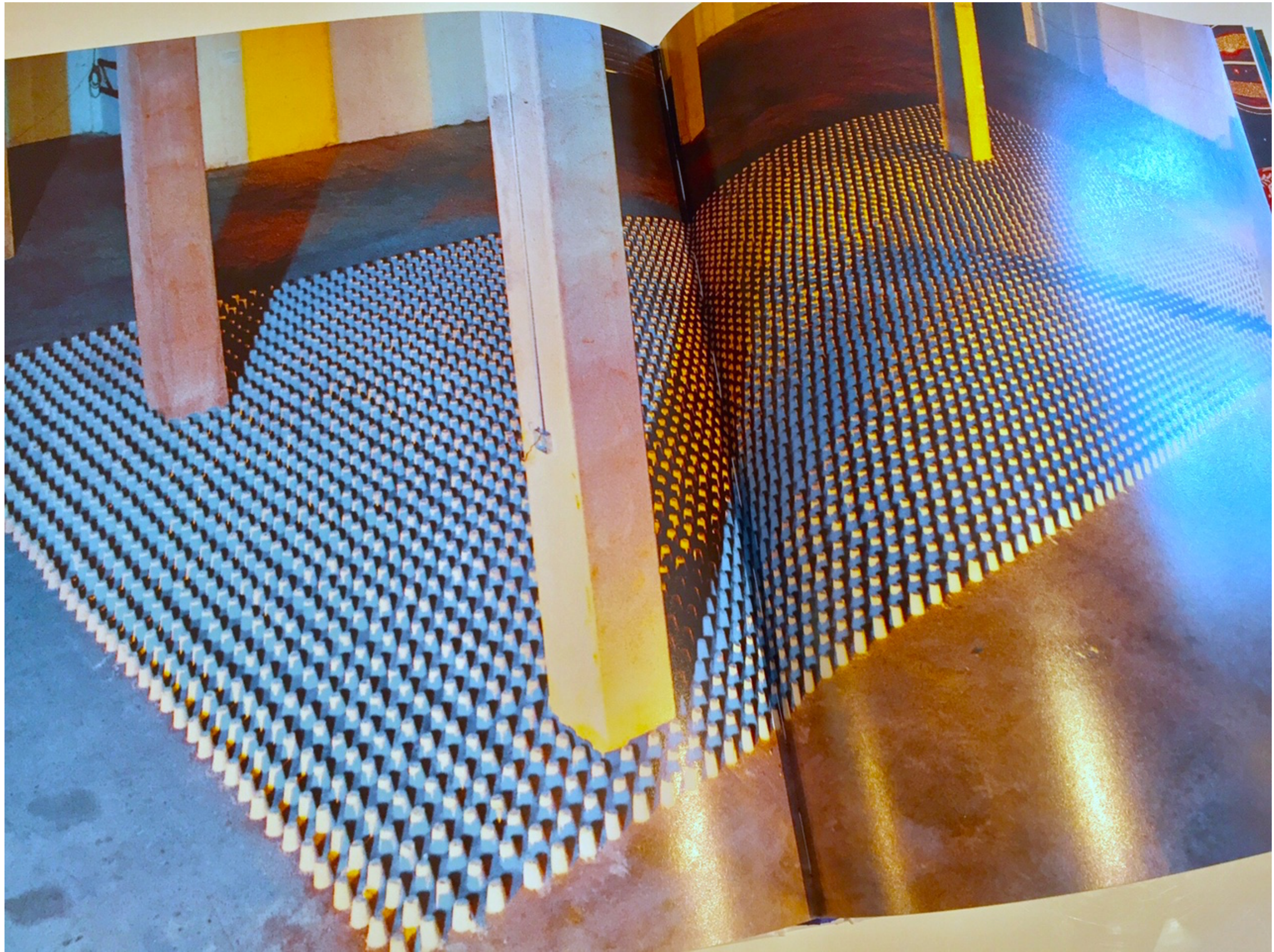
Mixed-media artist Carlos Betancourt and his influential studio, Imperfect Utopia, helped to launch the Miami art scene in the 1980s. Betancourt's oeuvre is a lush explosion of radiant, esoteric colors in which he explores the kaleidoscope (multi-racial, multi-lingual, trans-cultural) of Caribbean and American culture. His work alludes to issues of memory, beauty, identity, and communication. He bends the lines between art, photography, and nature in his photographs, collages, painting, installations, and conceptual pieces.

Carlos Betancourt's imagery reinterprets the past and present and offers it in a fresh context. He is inspired by Puerto Rico, Miami, and his extensive travels, as well as artist Ana Mendieta's interventions in nature, Robert Rauschenberg's assemblages, Andy Warhol's perceptions, Neo Rauch's compositions, and a Federico Fellini-esque cast of characters for his photo assemblages. Betancourt's artwork is included in the permanent collections of various museums, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art and The National Portrait Gallery.

This exuberant volume explores Betancourt's body of work, with more than 250 images and texts by art critic Paul Laster, art history professor Robert Farris Thompson and United States Inaugural Poet Richard Blanco.

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# REMARKS ON STYLE

ROBERT FARRIS THOMPSON

Trace two tendencies in the recent artworks of Carlos Betancourt as the artist continues to allude to issues of memories in his work —overall coloration making a composition completely white or completely purple or indigo, and starburst compositions in mostly blue and red and black. Both lead to developmental climaxes: a hall of objects with magical powers, *Portrait of a Garden*, 2009, with painted indigo set against red walls; and *Appropriations From El Rio*, 2013, an ultimate explosion with strongly marked axes all rendered in the color of iron, black.

## Doll As Memoire

Part of Betancourt's imagination is revealed when he honors his ancestors with careful rendering of the actual objects that they used. The artist inherited a doll from his grandmother and gives us here its portrait, *Aracoel's Doll*, 2011. A simple object has been treated in most concentrated form. The artist transmits clearly the essential floppiness of a doll. There is a hint of royalty or proximity to the divine in the placement of a crown on the head of the doll. Figuration meets abstraction in strange notations that surround the image. Vibrating lines and a field of dots give back to the doll a trace of motion. I have seen him use this doll in other artworks throughout the years.

## Color Emphasis

Start with a composition rendered entirely in white, *Let Them Feel White*, 2012, in which we can discern, among many objects, a moose with antlers, a person mounted on a horse, and a swan elegantly unfurling her wings. There is power and purity in all these objects, spiritual command which black Cubans call *aché*. The artist is thinking of the white garments, indicative of the transparent honesty of the Yoruba deity of creativity, Obatala.

In another composition, *Interventions with Aracoel's Objects*, 2002-2015, Betancourt takes objects that belonged to his late mother, a chair and a table with lamp, and by painting them all purple removes them from this world. He reinstates them in the world of the ancestors. Purple is the color of the redoubtable Yoruba deity, Babalu Aiye. Evil cannot cross the color of this god. Honoring the ancestors with a chair once occupied reminds

me of a 1949 mambo by the Puerto Rican musician and composer Tito Rodriguez when he sings ...*en un sillón de bejuco solito me acomodé...* [in an armchair of rattan I made myself comfortable]. The music brought back to latino New York an aspect of Caribbean living, cozy and creole, the world in which Betancourt grew up.

Close attention to the powers of overall coloration lead to a masterpiece, *Portrait of a Garden*, 2009, a long hall painted fire-engine red in which we see personifications of the artist's memories, mounted on pedestals for emphasis and all set in perspective at the painted indigo/purple. Set in perspective at the vanishing point, we see an apparent leader, recognized as such because of his protagonism in the room. The play of the indigo spirits, rescued from the past, against the red of the walls sums up one of the more telling strategies of the artist.

## From Starburst to Ultimate Explosion

One particular sequence, starburst to explosion-like formations, involves dramatic bursts of light and axially.

Start with two examples of the starburst motif. One pits a flower-like design in accents of black and grey against a blue background in *Recollections VIII (gris)* 2009. But like a firecracker beginning to sizzle, escaping lines show that this motif could possibly explode. The same reading defines another work, *Recollections VIII (rojo con azul)*, 2009, a scarlet burst set against blue. He is intrigued with the possibility of releasing beautiful energy from all this.

Betancourt begins to reduce the motif to fighting weight, burning off the fat and leaving lean strong lines radiating from a central point. Here he achieved what he sensed was always there: a statement in iron and radiating lines where all the accents are exactly right. These accents refer to objects which the artist himself had collected.

Betancourt is shown standing by the work *Appropriations From El Rio*, 2013. He strikes the Kongo pose, hand on hip, other hand extended commandingly. This pose means let her rip, begin (or end) the proceedings, which is exactly what has happened, and we are confronted with an abiding masterpiece of 21st century sculpture.



