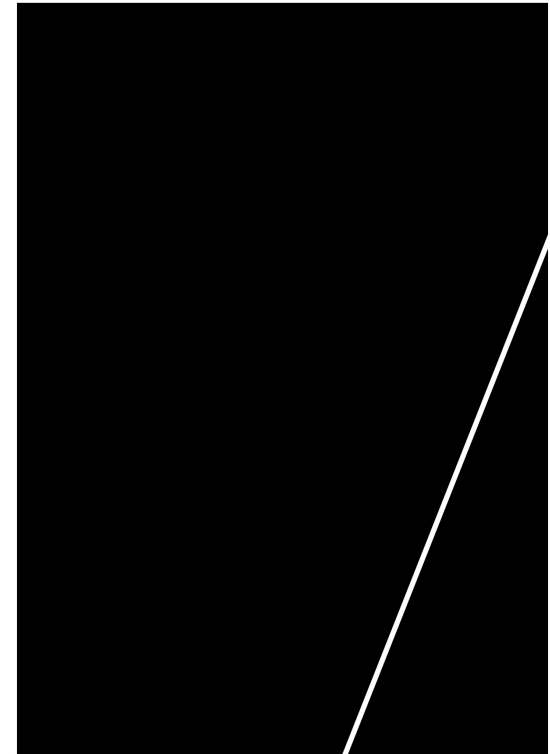


Primary.



Divina Locura





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III

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After Laughter  
Comes Tears.

Thank You:  
A.L. + C.G. + T.G.  
D.B. + R.R.

You lovely island  
tropical breezes.  
pineapples growing,  
coffee blossoms blowing.  
You ugly island,  
of tropic diseases.  
the hurricanes blowing,  
population growing,  
money owing,  
babies crying,  
bullets flying.  
I like the island \_\_\_\_\_.  
Smoke on your pipe  
and put that in!





*Installation Views 1 + 2*



There is an energy that exudes from Carlos Betancourt that I affectionately categorize as *madness*.

It might be an unfair, confusing way to open this attempt at an essay, I just can't help but believe in the veracity of that word when describing this artist and his focus. It's an arguable statement, but there is a purity in that definition I admire, a chaos to beauty that shouldn't go unrecognized when considering the elements of this exhibition.

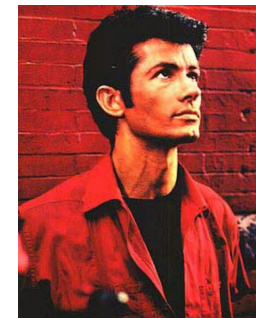
In the not so distant past, I connected with Betancourt to further discuss the development of *Process Ritual Future Eternal*. Over the course of our conversation, he brought to mind the brother sister characters from the 1961 romantic tragedy *West Side Story*. Betancourt's smokey physical attributes paired with his palatable confidence reminded me of George Chakiris's character "Bernardo" where as Betancourt's hopeful, somewhat innocent convictions had me recalling Natalie Wood's character "Maria". Naturally, I begin to assemble rough parallels between the two stories. Both embrace cultural identity and a desire to ascertain some version of beauty. Both have a romantic result of resettling, fighting for growth, searching out dreams, amidst clutching of the most cherished of memories.



When it comes to West Side Story, it's possible that I play the foils of the story, Anita and Riff. I am a bit of a realist, an unfortunate voice of reason, with a long term dedication to love. Not sure if I am dramatically different or extremely similar to our main characters but I know I am here to play a part in helping our viewers understand how far Betancourt has come.

The truth is that Betancourt is better described as a combination of our two protagonists, Tony and Maria. He is a heroic figure that believes in all the grander potential the future may hold. He is willing to sacrifice everything to see that reality come to fruition. He is no stranger to hardship, heartache, and the unmistakable drive to overcome. You can feel this in the broader scope of his work and personally, this depth of dedication is what I want to root for.

It's quite possible this is all just some long winded attempt to sell a bottle of poetic snake oil, but at the end of the day, maybe what we are seeking is just a piece of rare beauty for ourselves. It's not always the easiest thing to see when it presents itself, but when you recognize it for what it is, preservation may be the better option.



Coming from a family where musicals were held in the highest regard, this combination of characters in the flesh was an unfathomable occurrence. This played entirely to my psyche and since this Bernstein & Sondheim musical taught me so much about the stark poetry of life, I buried myself in Betancourt's history, allowing that to be my acting guide.

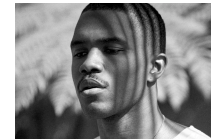
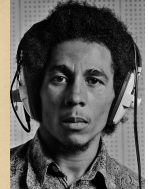
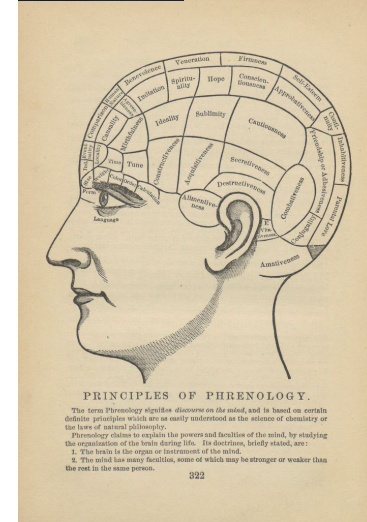
The story behind this exhibit powers my bones and pushes the blood through the creeks of my body. It keeps me curious about the force that carries Betancourt. How did he triumph this body of work? What brings the viewer to the room? Why is it brave? The brush stroke is broader than some might realize, of this I am certain.

Betancourt's bravery can be attributed in part to his choice of materials, the majority being objects originally mass produced in celebration of the Christmas holiday. Critics can argue the fine line Betancourt walks between high art and a kitsch low-brow, *but fuck all that*, the medium is important when aiming to engage the full spectrum of society, be it institution, private collector, or visual consumer. In his approach, Betancourt is considering how these materials immediately engage the memory of the masses, similar to how popular music tugs at the heartstrings of the most avid listeners.



It is possible that Betancourt's creations run the risk of taking a back seat to every memory that comes before the viewer. It's hard to believe he would be comfortable with this scenario. The fact is that this artist blindly channels every ounce of himself into the work. His execution is not just an arrant reminder of our own individual histories but an opportunity for the viewer to contribute to a newer dialogue. Seems somewhat incredulous, but this is the gift that is Carlos Betancourt.

Artists have been known to wear their hearts on their sleeves, pouring themselves out to the world, a transfer of energy, delivering us objects of inspiration. Betancourt embodies these traits and if his goal were simply to deliver us an exhibition that encourages the viewer to embrace beauty at face value, then why the hell not? That would be purity at its best, so let's not fuck that up. When presented with that moment, we should allow the work to remind us of the carefree days of our own youths and all the huckleberry friends that participated in those ancient, simpler times.





Upon entering Primary's expansive, low lit exhibition space, the viewers senses are immediately seized by the twinkle of the cosmos, setting the stage for a journey that is both foreign and familiar.

Drawn to the back of the gallery, you are presented with an 101 in. x 101 in. illumination assembled from 100+ vintage tree toppers. This seminal work, "Times of Illumination" is the Alpha and Omega of the body, it sets the stage for Betancourt's back story, giving birth to the kaleidoscope of nostalgia mounted just beyond your peripheral vision.

In his youth, Betancourt found himself at a loss when he learns that generations of holiday decorations had been left behind when immigrating to Miami from Puerto Rico. This singular moment triggered a deep rooted response for Betancourt, the self designated protector of memories began delivering these discarded objects from an unsavory fate. His dedication builds to a fever pitch, when his collection of memories lost, find themselves repurposed for the sake of the individual, encouraging us to reach out to both our future and our past simultaneously.





Further, suspended in the core of the exhibition space, you find yourself at the mercy of "Mancini's Curtain", a large scale sculptural work measuring 282.5" long x 24" deep x 133" tall, fashioned from tens of thousands of string bulbs with a motion that mimics the slow thaw of a lunar waterfall. Titled in honor of the American composer Henry Mancini, Betancourt created the work accompanied by soundtrack, a compilation of Mancini's catalog and an extended obsession with the classic tune *Moon River*. The lyrics, written by Johnny Mercer, hint at a nostalgia for the authors care-free childhood, leaving home in search for greater opportunity, maneuvering through the depths of a world mixed up. One can see why Betancourt would attach himself to this heartbreaking ballad in the midst of developing this exhibit, and at a closer look, there is a unique parallel I personally find intriguing, worth mentioning.

Moon River has a long history of being covered by everyone from Andy Williams to Morrissey, Judy Garland to most recently, Frank Ocean. It's almost a rite of passage and it is similar to how Betancourt repurposes objects. These creatives participate in a longer history, they have the ability to place anything onto a pedestal and successfully introduce the forgotten to a new audience. It's a godlike responsibility entrusted to artists and it's an ability that has become second nature to Betancourt.



Betancourt isn't the first creative to utilize these symbolic objects in a contemporary art context. Paul McCarthy's 1996 grotesque performance *Tokyo Santa*, portrays Santa Claus with a camera and knife, a satire on the paradigm of society, touching upon the darker side of America and undoubtedly the complete opposite of what Betancourt is aiming to achieve.

*Christmas (with Double Boy on Crutches)*, 1991, by John Baldessari appropriates photos of a crippled boy at the foot of Kris Kringle, capturing the popular culture interpretation of the biblical passage, "it is more blessed to give than it is to receive." In a 2013 conversation with David Salle, Baldessari responds to a question about developing his distinct style out of step to his contemporaries. In response, he references the classic novella *A Christmas Carol*, "I always felt like I was right out of Dickens, looking in the window of the Christmas feast, but not at the feast. I still kind of feel like that, but I'm going to do what I do, so it doesn't really matter." My heart goes out to this approach, it's what separates artists, it makes good artists great and great works memorable.

Betancourt radiates these characteristics and when it comes to the holiday objects in question, he is one of few, capable of maintaining the power of the peoples holiday and present it successfully within the contemporary zeitgeist by engaging the emotional baggage of every possible viewer.

