

# MIAMI'S ART BOOM



*From Local Vision to International Prese.*

## STEP INTO THE VIBRANT HEARTBEAT

of Miami's art scene during a transformative period in *Miami's Art Boom*. Award-winning art critic Elisa Turner presents over 100 of her best profiles, reviews, and stories to capture the evolution of Miami's visual arts community before and after the inaugural Art Basel Miami Beach in 2002. This book reveals how a constellation of visionary artists, curators, galleries, and museums ignited a cultural revolution that propelled the region onto the international stage.

Through four chronological sections and a richly contextualizing introduction, readers are invited to witness a pivotal era when creative pioneers like José Bedia, Carlos Betancourt, María Brito, Gary L. Moore, Eugenia Vargas-Pereira, Edouard Duval-Carrié, María Martínez-Cañas, and many others redefined artistic boundaries. Their individual stories are artfully interwoven with the broader narrative of a community energized by cross-cultural exchange. As Miami transformed into a flourishing hub of global artistry amid burgeoning support from state and private funders, the groundwork was laid for Art Basel Miami Beach, a landmark event whose explosive impact continues to reverberate.

*Miami's Art Boom* is more than a history—it is a vibrant cultural artifact that not only defies myths about Miami's artistic roots but also celebrates the spirit of innovation and diversity. This detailed, lively collection is an essential read for art students and scholars, professionals, and anyone passionate about the power of creativity. Embrace the story of Miami's rise from the foundational work of local visionaries to the exhilarating exchange of the international art world and experience an inspirational journey.

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FROM LOCAL VISION TO  
INTERNATIONAL PRESENCE

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ART BOOM

UNIVERSITY PRESS OF FLORIDA

Gainesville/Tallahassee/Tampa/Boca Raton

Pensacola/Orlando/Miami/Jacksonville/Ft. Myers/Sarasota

an landscape. Huff played a widely  
ity as an accomplished artist and  
n at Miami Dade College, further  
nated. Gloria Luria was one of a  
tists at the time, part of the region's

ra Gillman. On February 17, 1989, I  
h anniversary exhibition. It proved  
community had begun to grow but  
t. A common complaint was that  
ention to art produced locally.  
Caribbean culture was part of my  
ed me to explore whether annual  
Month in February actually made  
awareness of Black artists with  
musician, visual artist, curator,  
Despite other events occasion-  
ual attention to Black History  
arginalizing if not erasing Black  
ic about Black History Month  
th," said jazz singer Alice Day.  
history? Why is it not part of  
question anticipated protests  
n 2013 following the acquittal  
Rayvon Martin, a 17-year-old

at what is now the Marshall  
enter was prescient, an early  
of African descent achieving  
as the National Conference  
sional artists. Among the art-  
nzulu Gene Tinnie. Thirty  
ble difference in the careers

During his career, Humes taught art in Miami-Dade County Public  
Schools. His first solo exhibition in decades took place after his retirement  
following the murder of George Floyd. It was *Matters of the Inner City* in  
2021–22 at the Marshall S. Davis Sr. African Heritage Cultural Arts Center,  
produced with support from Oolite Arts.

Tinnie has for years been a consequential figure in Miami, recognized in  
2023 as a Social Justice Award winner from Oolite Arts, receiving a \$9,000  
Ellies Award. Tinnie is praised on the Oolite website for his "local career as  
a proactive force of historic change," especially when he joined the historic  
Miami Black Arts Workshop in Coconut Grove in 1974. Oolite notes that  
he's well known for his long-standing Middle Ship Passage Replica Project.

A profile of Carlos Betancourt was published in June 1994. Betancourt's  
exuberantly colored multidisciplinary art has earned widespread attention in  
the years since I interviewed him at his Lincoln Road studio in Miami Beach.  
In 2024, during events coinciding with Art Basel Miami Beach, Betancourt  
and architectural designer Alberto Latorre participated in the Reefline, an  
ambitious, massive collaboration bringing together committed minds of art  
and science. Reefline partners include the Knight Foundation, the interna-  
tional architectural firm Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), the  
University of Miami, and Coral Morphologic. Miami's Coral Morphologic  
combines art and science to study how coral reefs will evolve and can be  
protected in the 21st century, working with the University of Miami and  
the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Reefline  
was conceived as a way to create sculptural, artificial reefs that will conserve  
marine life severely damaged by the climate crisis. Betancourt and Latorre's  
contribution is *Miami Reef Star*, a large-scale environmental sculpture that  
promises to radiate their signature brio. During Miami Art Week 2024, the  
prototype for *Miami Reef Star* was installed as illuminated 3D-printed stars  
arranged in the shape of a 60-foot star temporarily positioned near the water's  
edge of Miami Beach. Plans call for their completed sculpture to be placed in  
water 15 to 20 feet deep. Initially slated "to break water" by late spring 2025,  
the Reefline will be a seven-mile underwater sculpture park, snorkel trail, and  
hybrid reef located just off Miami Beach. It is the brainchild of art curator  
Ximena Caminos and Colin Foord, a marine biologist and cofounder of

Coral Morphologic. According to the Reefline's website, its goal is to nurture "environmental awareness through art and action-driven conservation."

In 1998, I began my role as the *Miami Herald's* primary art critic. In August that year, a show at the Main Library downtown branch of Miami-Dade County Public Library System took as its provocative theme the politics of boats. Boats have a particular resonance in South Florida, from pleasure yachts anchored in coastal marinas to rickety vessels delivering—or floundering in the attempt—Cuban and Haitian refugees to South Florida.

Such waterborne vessels present a potent symbol of how the immigrant experience continually reinvents Miami. This review is the first of many documenting an important series of library exhibits curated by Barbara Young and others. They placed artists' vivid takes on arresting topics front and center in the public sphere.

During 1995 and 1997, Barbara Neijna and Mira Lehr produced work inspired by Miami's fragile coastal geography. In the early 21st century, we've become intensely aware of how rising seas adversely affect this cosmopolitan city perched on the edge of the Atlantic. Now an acute timeliness infuses 1990s art by Neijna and Lehr.

In October 1995, the Center for the Fine Arts, renamed Miami Art Museum the following year, presented Neijna's large-scale installation *Interior Landscapes* for the museum's *New Work* series. A strong, Everglades-earthy sense of primeval South Florida imbued her *Interior Landscapes*.

Slightly over a decade later, Neijna completed a resounding, handsomely textured tribute in public art to the Everglades, besieged for years by relentless urban sprawl. The magnificent scale of her *Foreverglades* at Miami International Airport, installed in 2007 on two floors of Concourse J, permits travelers to step across a glossy black terrazzo tile floor stretching 65,000 square feet. It is graced with jewel-like photos of vegetation and bas-relief panels embedded with reminders of South Florida's natural history. Throughout *Foreverglades* are poetic quotes from the 1947 classic *A River of Grass* celebrating the Everglades by Marjory Stoneman Douglas, whose words begin the concourse: "Nothing else is like them, their vast glittering openness, wider than the enormous visible round of the horizon."

Widely exhibited and collected, Lehr has been hailed as an eco-artist for

her elegant odes to the endangered. Her paintings and three-dimensional clusters inspired by marine life. Lehr's *Continuum* Gallery in June 1997, articulated Bringing vigorous new energy to Art (MOCA) in North Miami opened a permanent collection. It was located in a building designed by Gwathmey Sawyer. The founding executive director was Lehr. The institution that evolved into MOCA of Contemporary Art (COCA).

Barely a decade earlier, writing an anniversary exhibit, I had recorded collectors and museums ignored in how museums interacted and the soon-to-be-established Center for the Fine Arts (CFA) in 1996. As they grew, they began to

In 1996, MOCA's inaugural exhibit, *Making in New York, Miami, and Miami* artists included in that Quisqueya Henriquez, Teresita drew support from prominent Carlos and Rosa de la Cruz, chair Richard Shack.

Also in 1996, the Center for Miami Art Museum when it exquisitely installed presented exhibit was *Sacred Arts of Haiti* able to other venues: an altar Dantor by artist Rara Kuyou both Haitian-born South Florida *Sacred Arts* traveled from Museum of Cultural History.

## CARLOS BETANCOURT

### Miami Beach Artist's "Splintered Vision" at Core of *Fracturism*

June 21, 1994

There's a blue tattoo on Carlos Betancourt's tanned, freckled shoulder, something curling, arching, even beckoning. A mermaid? A scorpion? The Miami Beach artist laughs.

"It's an angel," he says. "An angel looking over my shoulder."

It's not as if Betancourt, 28, needs a guardian angel. His paintings and award-winning furniture designs have caught the attention of the *New York Times*, *Elle*, *House and Garden*, and a slew of other publications. He designed the interiors for area clubs like Boomerang and the Butter Club. Sylvester Stallone recently commissioned Betancourt and artist Miguel Delgado to paint murals for his Miami home, among them a 20-by-5-foot replica of Michelangelo's *Expulsion of Eve from Paradise* scene in the Sistine Chapel.

"It was a fantastic experience because I was able to try to paint like Michelangelo," says Betancourt, reverence in his voice.

It's a curious switch: Warhol and Lichtenstein, not the Renaissance master, have been a strong influence on much of Betancourt's paintings, which include enormous Pop-style, ultracamp portraits of Celia Cruz and Miami Beach diva Tara Solomon.

On a sun-blazing Saturday afternoon, in the 90-degree heat outside his Lincoln Road gallery, Imperfect Utopia, the artist is up, radiant with energy. He's lithe and loose in tank top, shorts, and Birkenstocks. Slipping in and out of a shoulder-shuddering salsa, he describes how he danced with actress Marisa Tomei at Stallone's recent Planet Hollywood bash. Now he shifts lightly from one foot to the other, takes a drag on a cigarette, and smiles broadly. He's excited about his show of new work, which will open that evening.

Sheets of white paper cover the storefront window, veiling the new works until nighttime, but a poem Betancourt scrawled across the glass offers some cryptic hints about what's inside. The language is dense, the meter



FIGURE 6. Carlos Betancourt and Alberto Latorre, *Splendor in the Shelter: It's Raining Cats and Dogs*, 2014. Mixed media. Miami-Dade Animal Services Pet Adoption & Protection Center, 3599 NW 79th Ave. Courtesy of Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs, Art in Public Places Trust.

indecipherable, but the last line strikes a chord on this multilingual island of tropical kitsch and thrift-shop glitz. The poem reads, "I long to assemble the splintered vision of all that I know."

"Splintered vision" dovetails neatly with the title of Betancourt's new show, *Fracturism*. The paintings—layered with a noisy web of shattered, broken-up images—were inspired by the multicultural sensory overload the artist sees as a condition of our lives on the edge of the millennium. Of a recent trip to Buenos Aires, for example, he says, "You listen to the music there, and it's a mixture of everything—flamenco-bossa nova, tango-jazz, salsa-flamenco."

His mixed-media paintings feature photo-silk-screened portraits of such varied icons as Audrey Hepburn, male models in Banana Republic shorts, the patron saint of Cuba, and dissident Cuban poet María Elena Cruz Varela. They are interlaced with dreamy blue skies, organic forms—some dripping and bloody, some tender and green—and futuristic drawings recalling the artist's sinuous chairs and lounges. The works are encased in black fragments of mismatched frames, a device that adds to their chaotic energy.

"My works let me express 300 things visually at the same time," Betancourt says.

"They scream at you," says John Casey, who included Betancourt in a show of Miami artists that he curated for a Sarasota gallery in March. "He travels on the edge of this cleft between cultures," Casey says, comparing Betancourt's art to his habit of switching back and forth between Spanish and English. On the one hand, "he's got that very heavy religious element, with a lot of blood and suffering," while other images suggest the inclusive pop sensibility of Robert Rauschenberg.

Betancourt creates just such uncomfortable juxtapositions in *Viaje y destino de Raiza la balsera*, inspired by the wrenching story of a Cuban rafter who survived the perilous crossing with her young son but died shortly after, having given all her drinking water to her child. "It killed me, that story," says Betancourt.

In the painting, a black-and-white silk-screened photo of a child's round face, shaded slightly by a baseball cap, appears several times—floating among blue skies with puffy cumulus clouds, boxed into a radiant orange area near the edge of the canvas (where the artist has written a few lines in his trademark and nearly illegible reverse script). Elsewhere, there is contrasting deep and shallow space, with architectural constructions that seem to begin and end nowhere.

Ready to crush this airy network of sky, faces, and spaces is a torrent of dripping red and blue, like great clusters of tears or drooping hearts cut in half. This emotional outpouring of paint, in contrast to the bland architectural fragments, seems to evoke the mother's great sacrifice, which was her son's tremendous loss and gain.

The work reflects another theme in the show: the artist's fascination with

women as icons of beauty and suffering, ravaged beacons of hope and desire. In the same conversation, he waxes rhapsodic about Audrey Hepburn and Cruz Varela. "She had one of the most honest and beautiful smiles you can imagine," he says of Hepburn, whom he met in Miami several years ago. Of Cruz Varela, who has been persecuted and jailed for her poems in Cuba, "What she is is all in her face. Intense. Angelic."

This is just the sort of riveting contrast that Betancourt thrives on: the elegant Hollywood star and the brutally victimized poet, women from vastly different worlds whose soulful likenesses he's brought together in a single work.

There's yet another contrast to experience at Imperfect Utopia—the clash between Betancourt's "screaming" paintings and the sleek furniture he designs. Placed near the center of the gallery is a low-slung wooden chaise, gently recalling the curving facade of Morris Lapidus's Fontainebleau Hotel. Other chairs and sofas, sporting shiny cushions of hot pink or lime green, are crafted from a few airy loops of wrought iron, playful grace notes to his passionate imagination.

Everything at Imperfect Utopia is part of a work in progress for one of Betancourt's biggest fans, Richard Alexander, executive producer of the company that brought *Les Misérables*, *Phantom of the Opera*, and *Miss Saigon* to Broadway and on tour. Alexander—who flew to Miami Beach from New York for the opening of *Fracturism* "even though we were having our opening of *Miss Saigon* that night in Washington with the president"—calls Betancourt "ferociously talented. . . . I think he will be in evolution (throughout) his entire career. He doesn't seem to have any boundaries. He has eyeballs that are on fire."

## GROUND LEVEL

### Transforming Trash

November 19, 1999

Pablo Cano picks up a stack of silver papers, neatly folded paper money. In this episode of *Miami Vice* he shows attaché cases to show

But the silver in the boxes and gum wrap of artistic imagination. Betancourt is prized for their patina. Marionettes—elegant. What's on view in *Ground Level*.

The title, say the first show, comes from an accumulated clutter. To discover, artists Cano and Fernandez have a lot

You may not find dragonflies, broken vintage beauty guides result than on the pro

The show is about favorite medium is betancourt's trash. She melds and fountains.

Alves, a noted ceramist