

**Time Out**

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are unsurpassable'*  
The Times

**Miami**  
**& the Florida Keys**



Written by local experts

# Wilde at heart

If you can't separate Andy Warhol from New York, or indeed Carlos Betancourt from Miami (see p176 **Pop goes Miami**), where does that leave Hernan Bas? The 30-year-old artist has much in common with Betancourt: he grew up in Miami to Hispanic parents, possesses dark good looks, produces work with a queer sensibility and is considered a major Miami artist. But whereas Betancourt's work has been written all over it – bright, kitsch, sexy and garish – Bas's paintings are worlds (and centuries) apart.

Romantic and decadent, melodramatic and gloomy, nostalgic and childlike, they are more fin de siècle than Fontainebleau Hilton. In contrast to Betancourt's Adonises and socialites, Bas's works are populated by gaunt teenage waifs and lonely dandies. Instead of pop culture icons like Andy Warhol, Bas was inspired by Oscar Wilde, classical myths and Hardy Boys adventure stories.

Bright sunshine doesn't get a look-in: his gothic paintings are set in caves, cellars and castles.

Betancourt has tongue planted in cheek; Bas is steeped in melancholy. One critic likened him to 'morbid friends from high school who quoted Camus and dreamed of death'.

So can you separate the artist from the city? Not entirely. For one thing, this city has a morbid and macabre tradition, from Miami crime novels to *CSI: Miami*. This dark side is evident in youth culture: there's a shift away from the glitzy fabulousness of South Beach to underground parties in gritty Downtown warehouses. Bas is part of that scene. What's more, themes of alienation and angst are not anathema in a city that is obsessed with appearances and status.

Bas's work may contain old-world allusions – among them figurative painting techniques, classical

references, Blyton-esque illustrations – but they are thoroughly contemporary, exploring issues of queer identity (he has christened his subjects 'nouveau sissies'). This old world-new world fusion is a Miami trademark: the city, for instance, was built by architects who took romantic European styles and gave them a modern twist.

As Bas himself says: 'Miami is all about escapism' – even if it's from Miami itself. And while the dandies of Hernan Bas may be more Oscar Wilde than Ocean Drive, the decadent aesthetic – with its flamboyance, fantasy and excess – is appropriate. In that sense, Betancourt was right: you really can't take the Miami out of the boy.

Hernan Bas is represented by the Fredric Snitzer Gallery (see p177). His works are also part of the collection at the Museum of Contemporary Art (see p103).



The Burden  
(I Shall Leave No Memoirs)

# Pop goes Miami



Portrait of a Dream VII.

'You can't separate Warhol from New York, Picasso or Dalí from Spain, and you can't separate me from Miami Beach.' So says Carlos Betancourt (*pictured, right*), local artist, celebrity and man about town. Certainly, Miami is written all over his work. His flamboyant photographs are slick and sexy, glam and trashy, sterile yet lush. Peopled by a Warhol-esque cast of local characters – from drag queens to beauty queens, muscle mays to society mavens – they are rich in colour and bathed in sunlight. Other Miami motifs include nature versus consumerism and nods to the artist's Caribbean roots.

His work may be parochial, but its appeal is universal: his photographs are now part of the permanent collections at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, as well as the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC. Not that Betancourt, 42, has joined the establishment. 'To play remorselessly is my mission. I could never be one of these artists who dresses in black, takes themselves seriously and tries to be profound. When critics say that my work is kitsch, I say "Thank you".'

Critics have in fact called him Miami's Andy Warhol. Betancourt also cites Damien Hirst and Keith Haring as influences. But his true inspiration, he says, is Morris Lapidus, the Miami architect who built gaudy modernist hotels including the Fontainebleau Hilton in the 1950s – and whom critics once dismissed as vulgar. 'Morris brought art to the people. He was accessible. Some artists try to get very intellectual, and they fail. Lots of artists are terrified of beauty, but I embrace it.' Even if it comes in the form of junk culture. One recent work, *Re-Collections*, was an installation of hundreds of old glass Christmas ornaments. In another, Betancourt is naked with a pink plastic flamingo.

Betancourt likes to get naked. He's certainly got the body for it (*People* magazine once featured him in their

50 Most Beautiful People issue). But his chiseled torso is often covered in Caribbean-style body painting – a nod to his roots (he was born in Puerto Rico).

Indeed, beneath the glitter lies a deep nostalgia. 'My work is attached to the past,' he says. 'I collect people, I collect ornaments, I use artifacts. But I bring the past into the present.' In one work, for instance, glitzy Miami Beach is imprinted with an ancient Caribbean symbol. 'It's all to do with trying to leave a mark, with figuring out where you belong.'

Surely the place he belongs is Miami. 'There's a lot of tackiness and artificiality in Miami, but that's not such a bad thing. I prefer it to the coldness of New York. If someone is fake here, it's transparent, you can tell right away. In New York, it takes a couple of years. Everyone tells me I have to move to New York for work. But I'm not going anywhere.'

*Carlos Betancourt is represented by the Diana Lowenstein Fine Arts (see below) and is part of the collection at the Bass Museum of Art (see p72); [www.carlosbetancourt.com](http://www.carlosbetancourt.com).*