

# CARLOS BETANCOURT

# THE MIAMI SCHOOL

CONVERSATIONS



Richard Haas mural on Fontainebleau Hotel

# KATERINA LLANES

MAKING MIAMI

Katerina Llanes: So lovely to see you.

Carlos Betancourt: Same here.

Katerina: We're going to talk today about your experience in Miami, in the art scene from the 1980s to the present.

Carlos: Okay. I'll tell you a little bit about my introduction to Miami Beach, which was kind of mythical in my mind's eye. I was born and raised in Puerto Rico to Cuban parents, and I came for the first time to Miami Beach around 1971 when I was 6 years old. Ponce de Leon, first governor of Puerto Rico, died looking for the Fountain of Youth in Florida. Miami had pink flamingos, springs, alligators, Flipper, Everglades, exploration and fantastical architecture. I remember having a

fascination with the Fontainebleau Hotel, the decaying Art Deco building and the other jetsonian buildings, even at that early age. Little did I know then that I would meet Morris Lapidus, the visionary architect of the Fontainebleau Hotel, and that Miami would be one of my main muses.

Katerina: The trompe l'oeil mural that made it feel like you were driving into the water, it was so magical. Sadly, they tore it down in 2003.

Carlos: It was a trompe-l'œil mural by Richard Haas.

Katerina: I loved it! Was mesmerizing to me as a kid.

Carlos: Oh it was! The Fontainebleau was in decay after the years of Frank Sinatra and all of those great entertainers, but it was grand architecture of joy. And when that building was done, it was one of the most influential buildings in the world. It was both loved and hated.

Katerina: Morris Lapidus was ahead of his time.

Carlos: Yes, he gave Miami a definite style, form and a shape. We eventually became friends and he used to stop by my studio that was in Miami Beach, Imperfect Utopia.

Katerina: Incredible!! But before we get to Imperfect Utopia, I heard you were part of a Christo and Jeanne-Claude fan club!

Carlos: When I was in high school, our art teacher, Mr. Fitzpatrick spoke to us about Christo and Jeanne-Claude doing the *Surrounded Islands*. I volunteered but not in the traditional way. I had friends with connections, friends who love to get in trouble. One of those friends loved to steal his father's car, and one day we showed up at the Pelican Harbor to watch the construction of the *Surrounded Islands*. One thing led to another, and I was passing out cups of water, helping people, and assisting or bothering these older artists. I was "volunteering" if you can call it that, watching all day, seeing all the material, and being heavily impacted by the brilliant fuchsia color and this idea of how monumental art can be outside the white cube. Also, it was my first appreciation of

Photos courtesy of Carlos Betancourt

Hyperspace, run by the late Victor Fariñas, was also a favorite alternative space. It had an intimate movie theater that showed B-movies like *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*, also *Metropolis* and *Ciao Manhattan* and random footage of *Bettie Page* and *Bunny Yeager*. I exhibited there some large graphics with *Carlos Alves*, *Linda Faneuf* and several others in the late 80's, 90's. *Elisa Turner* reviewed some of the exhibits.

At this moment, Miami Beach was being identified as the next underground scene. Other artists favorite places where *Café Des' Arts* (where *Howard Davis* of *F&I* curated special nights), *Sempers* (hosted by the dynamic duo *Louis Canales* and *Tara Solomon*), the *Woolworth* dinner counter on *Lincoln Road*, the *Amsterdam Palace* (eventually the *Versace Mansion*) and *Lums* on *Lincoln Road*. Slowly galleries start opening in the beach. I showed mainly with *Helen Cevern Gallery* in group shows with *Kenny Scharf* and other artists.

You could feel the shape of things to come back then. It was an art community forming organically, connected to the source, a scene of sorts. There was purity, and innocence. The possibilities were infinite. We were inspired by our surroundings. People gravitated towards the beach because there was a commonality of a style, sound, and language that still was not defined, but soon. All disciplines of art, from ballet to painting, were in flux in *South Beach* and eventually in *Miami*, in a symbiotic relationship inspired by similar forces. Generally it was the syncretism's of *Miami's* new unique mixing of cultures. Artist friends were doing cutting edge performances inside parking garages or inside supermarkets. I remember vividly a production by *Art Act*, with costumes designed by the legendary *Barbara Hulanicki*, of *Biba* fame. She still lives in the *South Beach*. The community was developing its own voice.

Katerina: A signature.

Carlos: Yes, somethings like that.



I think that a counterculture or underground scene has to develop organically because it is mostly against any trends. It is a group of thinkers with common interest, but ironically, individuality of thought is treasured. I believe the *South Beach* underground scene developed organically, like a magnet, attracting similar people with very independent minds. The most common goal was to be able to express freely and authentically. That is why individuality was treasured, without it, honesty could not flourish. The *South Beach* scene took a more definite shape once the artists began to arrive attracted in part by what was already there, and of course always the sea. The early gay, fashion and modeling scene followed, also attracted by the same forces. And as we start spending time together, a "scene" is created with the same artists, the same gallery owners, the same drug dealers, the

same door person, all going to the same places attracted by the same visual language and vibe. I remember when artist *Keith Herring* opened a *Pop Shop* on *5th Street* called *Wham Bam*, we knew similar people and went to the same places, the same when *Kenny Scharf* arrived to *Miami Beach*.



The Strand  
Miami Beach, 1987



There was very little money. However, we had this thriving force to create. Some people thought we were doing interesting things, and some artists started getting some attention from some international publications, like *Interview Magazine*, which was our "Bible". They did a special issue, half of it dedicated to *Miami* in 1987. *Andy Warhol* actually called the *Director of the Miami Design Preservation League*, *Diane Camber*, who eventually became the *Director of the Bass Museum*, because he wanted to see this place called the *Art Deco District*. And she gave him a tour. I have pictures of that!

Katerina: Amazing, I need to see those!

Carlos: It was interesting to get coverage in magazines that we admired and, of course, we read these sitting at the tables of the just opened *News Café*, but the goal of sort was to remain pure... Anyways, some of us joined the *Miami Design Preservation League*, led by the late *Barbara Capitman* and the late *Leonard Horowitz* in the battle to preserve the *Art Deco District* integrity. We used to tie ourselves to the buildings, light candles, and do vigils. We lost some buildings like the *Senator Hotel*, but we saved many others, like the *St Moritz*. The community that existed was participating in saving their community while creating a new one. The *Preservation League* won the fight to have the *Art Deco District* historically designated and, in a way, protected. We now have the largest collection of *Art*

*Deco* buildings in the world and it's in *Miami Beach*. I like to say "not everything old is bad, not everything new is great...."

Rent was still cheap. And we start attracting some of our "heroes" to come here and get inspired by our surroundings.

Katerina: So it's like cyclical energy.

Carlos: Nicely put. And in a way that starts validating some of our efforts. But we try to preserve *Paradise*.

Katerina: And what are the years? The mid-'80s to mid-'90s, would you say?

Carlos: Yes. These are the years of *Louis Canales*, *Tara Solomon*, *Susanne Bartsch*, huge influential forces in the scene and *Miami* in general. *Louis* moves from *New York*. He understood the alternative club scene and the influence that it could have. I attended a concert in 1991 at the *Cameo theater* on *Washington Avenue*. *David Byrne* performed with *Celia Cruz!* I remember thinking how our culture and *Miami* was quietly influencing the world.

So, you know, as I have said before, we wanted to keep the purity in some way... I think when *Madonna* started coming here, and other high-profile people, even though she had an edge, (she had been *Basquiat's* girlfriend), she was already becoming mainstream. And for many of us, we didn't want her here. She would call too much attention to the area. We were like, oh God, this is our little paradise. But you just can't stop it. That would be selfish, to take this inspiration away, so once in a while, I would hang out with this crowd and take them to see *Albita* at *El Centro Vasco* on *Calle Ocho*. It became like a ritual.

Also during this time, and after submitting my art portfolio, I was invited to join the *South Florida Art Center*, which was already a couple of years old. It was founded by the late *Ellie Schneiderman*, a visionary. I used to walk up and down with *Ellie* on *Lincoln Road*. When *Ellie* was interested in renting spaces, many of the artists would tell her, "Ellie, don't rent this! This is the future. Have your foundation buy these spaces."



She was an intuitive leader and the foundation bought them thanks to her. One of those spaces she bought for the Art Center for \$300,000 sold a few years ago for \$88 million. And that's why we now have Oolite Arts.

Katerina: Which is moving to Little Haiti.

Carlos: Yes, exactly. The South Florida Art Center was very important for us. It was very organized. And the Art Center had an edge.

Katerina: So Art Center is what brought you to Lincoln Road where you started Imperfect Utopia.

Carlos: Yes. Imperfect Utopia was mainly my working studio, also an incubator of ideas and art salon. It was a hang-out for my peers from the South Florida Art Center, my friends, family, drag queens, poets, performers and other fantastical creatures. The first artwork series I developed there was the *Assemblage* series, assembled from the utensils and kitchen ware that I collected from the Netherland Hotels in Ocean Drive.

Katerina: Oh cool, I like that. And the space was a ground-level storefront?

Carlos: Yes, it was a storefront. This was where I lived also. It did not have a tub or shower. I had a hose attached to a sink. And I would take a shower in the alley on the back, so did a lot of people and a lot of my artists friends..... A lot of people took showers there.

At Imperfect Utopia We would conceive artworks, have poetry readings, performances, exhibits, and parties of course. It was a microcosm of the forces that were active in South Beach back then. I remember working with artist Carlos Alves on an installation in the huge display window of Imperfect Utopia. We assembled a composition of objects we had collected from the streets after the passage of scary Hurricane Andrew.

Some others that stopped by where Octavio Paz, Linda Evangelista, Tony Ward, Bruce Weber, Celia Cruz, Gianni Versace, Barry Diller, Glen Albin, Jason Rubell, Andrew Sullivan, and Rudolph Nureyev, whom I would spend hours with listening to his life stories. I remember Julian Schnabel and his beautiful Spanish wife at the time, Olatz. He liked my works from the *Fracturism* series. I used to play La Lupe for them. I was surprised they knew of her music. Julian eventually produced the masterpiece *Before Night Falls*, a movie about the life of Reynaldo Arenas, the legendary writer who escaped communist Cuba and lived in Miami Beach (Ocean Drive) and NYC for a while. And once we hosted an event for the renowned Jazz musician, Dizzy Gillespie.

Katerina: Wow, what a cast of characters! Did this crowd influence your work?



Imperfect Utopia,  
1987-95

704 Lincoln Rd,  
Miami Beach



Carlos: Yes! With all these very talented people around, we were absorbing knowledge like a sponge. We were certainly learning a lot of things not taught in art school! And it was at Imperfect Utopia that I found my language as an artist, when I began embracing my roots and Puerto Rican/Cuban heritage and the environments around me, as well. My reality, in other words. I had also begun to explore issues of memory, syncretism and using collage, silkscreens, and Miami as a muse.



Rauschenberg, whom I spoke with several times back then was highly influential. Collaging and layering was important to many of us. Then there was Morris Lapidus, the architect of the iconic Fontainebleau Hotel. I finally met him decades after my first visit to the hotel when I was a young kid. Glen Albin, editor of *Interview* magazine brought him to the studio. Back then hardly anyone new of him and we were his groupies, making sure he knew how important and influential he was to us. During his first visit to

Imperfect Utopia we became friends. I showed him an anthology on architecture that mentioned his influential work, a rare thing back then. He was so excited about this! I quickly pull a pen and he autographed the pages of the book where they mentioned him or showed pictures of his work.

Eventually Morris lived long enough to see several books about his influential works. My generation grew up surrounded in what some scholars called the "architecture of optimism". Morris was instrumental in developing that language, which still continues to influence my artwork and that of many others. I actually have a series of works called *Lapidus Infinitus*. And in Miami Beach there is a large sculptural glass artwork by Dan Graham titled *Morris'*, from 2010.

Katerina: I love Morris Lapidus and that Dan Graham piece! Didn't realize it was named after Lapidus, but that makes a lot of sense. I got to meet Graham once at *Lovely Day* in NYC. He was eating alone and I went over and knelt by his table to tell him how much I admired him and he asked me what my sign was, lol. He's very into astrology. There's something playful that connects him to Lapidus. That mural on the Fontainebleau felt like you were driving into an oasis. Made Miami truly magical!

CB: Indeed!

Katerina: And you made magic happen at Imperfect Utopia. What were your favorite shows there?



Dan Graham, *Morris'*,  
2010

Photo courtesy of  
Katelyn Kopenhaver

Carlos: My favorite exhibit at Imperfect Utopia was *Fracturism*. Elisa Turner wrote about it. The show was a series of mixed media paintings I created based on the concept of fractured culture: assembling the splintered vision of all that we knew and related to. This is before the internet attempted to organize information, before google became our memory. Collaging and layering was the best way we could represent this, with Rauschenberg influencing. I used silkscreen a lot. Here I found a unique language, once I embraced my ancestors and rituals, my own history and surrounding, no matter the circumstances. I was captivated then to explore issues of memory, identity, beauty, and nature, as I am now. I liked a lot the exhibit *Cuba-Cola* where I invited Afro Cuban dancers who performed around sculptures of roasted chickens. We also had events for Amnesty International in support of poet and political prisoner Maria Elena Cruz Varela, who inspired an early series of graphics I did.



I realized back then that Miami is a melting pot of backgrounds and cultures, but somehow we get to retain our identity, slightly removed from the melting pot theory. A new experiment, not truly assimilating, but mixing a little bit.

Katerina: More of a diamond with facets than a liquid that combines to become a new thing.

Carlos: Yes, how beautiful. Those are some of the things that happened. It was a laboratory of experiments. It seemed to be at the right place at the right time.



Keep in mind that this is also the time during the AIDS epidemic. A lot of people came down to Miami to live out their last years of life, many cashed their health insurance. I can give you dozens of names of dear friends and artists that passed away. The Cuban and the Haitian refugees dying at sea constantly. All these were tragic situations that impacted many of us. These were very personal moments, sad and confusing times.

Katerina: I was too young to experience the full force, but the echoes are haunting. We lost most of a generation. What I remember from South Beach as a teenager came after this. It was more of a club scene than an artist one. Is that part of why you closed Imperfect Utopia?

Carlos: Well, I thrived there as a young artist, after all it was primarily a working artist studio, but things were becoming more mainstream in South Beach. Even the gay scene. Warhol had died. And after Giannis death, it was like the end of innocence. And perhaps because it was so much in the news, everybody wanted to come to South Beach, as if it was just discovered. The energy was no longer organic or pure. Gentrification of sorts. I think what happened is that we started getting noticed a bit too much. And like I said, at first it was the publications that we admire, but then it was all kinds of publications. This was, in a way, very flattering and many of us benefited from it, but it was also opening, at least a bit, a Pandoras box. This had happened in other organic communities like Montmartre, and more recently, Soho in NYC. Artists making communities, developers gentrifying communities, artists moving on...The same developers that had helped gentrify Soho, moved to Miami Beach with the same intentions. It was the beginning of the transformation of the South Beach underground scene, and perhaps the last opportunity for a truly underground scene anywhere before social media made that impossible.

And with all these you start losing the dialogue, the conversation that was once very clear and focused is dissipated. So, a lot of things and magical places that were influential to us start disappearing, replaced by nightmare ugly modern cold spaces without personality. Imagine you have a Banana Republic opening on Lincoln Road, Victoria's Secret. The old Woolworths became McDonalds, and the doors of alternative spaces, cafes, gay clubs, art galleries, were shutting or getting gentrified. The gentrification was painful to watch, it was constant and careless and unfortunately, the local government supported it. It was too much. A little bit would have been okay.

Buildings start getting renovated no longer by local creatives but by outside and too corporate forces, all at light speed. And you could feel it, you could feel the change, the "we don't care". But a lot of money was coming in...And, you know, with money comes other possibilities... We're no longer in our 20s. We need to create a future that might cost money, if we want to create a family, travel, if we want to do big projects. So, we start becoming a little bit of accomplices with these forces. I learned quickly that it is all about balance...It was so different, that some of the artists that were here saw no future and started moving away to New York. Miami didn't have much of an artist support system back then, not even academically.

Katerina: That's true, to this day.

Carlos: Yes, in some ways. But I decided to stay in Miami not caring much about opportunities but about inspiration. I really believed in Miami, and it could only be one of my muses if I stayed here. But I understood that collectors weren't buying enough local work, so artists sometimes need to make economic decisions to survive, as well as to find other muses. But I was still fascinated with this place. I did question a lot of things during that period because so much of what we loved was disappearing, was being replaced by nonsense, with little creativity and nothing to do with Miami. It felt impersonal.

Katerina: They were importing things into Miami rather than looking in our backyard.

Carlos: Exactly. It was boring stuff, didn't have the dialogue, the conversation. Not challenging enough. I have to say also that during this period, there were some people who said, "There's nothing in Miami, there never has been." Of course, we were trying to find our own language, but there was always a language here. I really believed in Miami and Miami Beach as a muse, at different times, like Bunny Yeager, Ana Mendieta, Cesar Trasobares, Bruce Weber, Purvis Young, Carlos Alves, Keith Haring, and so many others.

Miami is inspiring to me, the ancient Tequesta, the kitsch, the elegant, the vulgar and edgy. Miami is tropical lush and parking lots, beautiful and ugly, dirty, clean, poor, rich and can be very Avant Garde. Most of us tolerating each other and getting along somehow, most of the time. Like Paris in the early 1900's, it still is in a way. And after all, it was in Miami Beach where Robert Miller first saw my artwork. He loved Miami. We explored it so much. It was very symbolic for my friends and I when I signed with his gallery in NYC, without having to move to NYC! You see, I am an island person, and Miami is almost like an island, water everywhere, the Everglades to the west, the Atlantic on the other sides, and highway barriers everywhere. Yes, Miami is an island. I heard someone say once that the best things about Miami is that it so close to the United States...



And I tell you, it was encouraging seeing back then at least a few artists comfortable embracing Miami, being inspired by it, the good and the bad, the reality of it, and not moving to another town like so many others did.

Katerina: Embracing all of what it was. I had a hard time with that. I moved away because I wanted something more. But there's usually a pull that brings you back home. It's like a magnet.

Carlos: Things move, evolve, but there is always opportunity where you connect. Keith Haring said something like, "The primitive will always make us new." That statement had resonance with me. I translated it into ... - once you know your roots, once you own your reality, the possibilities are infinite.

Ironically during this time, I found comfort and inspiration literally in the primitive and underground, (in the oolite) when I became a volunteer in the recently discovered Miami Circle archeological site. It was very important to me, but somehow many of my peers didn't see the site as history. My artwork continued to be influenced by my Caribbean roots, but my new present was Miami and I kept embracing it in several ways.

The site consisted of a perfect circle measuring 38 feet of cut stone in the ground. "It is the only prehistoric permanent structure cut into the bedrock in the eastern United States.. It predates any other known permanent settlement ". It is believed to be the location of a structure built by the Tequesta indigenous people of Miami around 2000 years ago. It was a very important discovery that actually made it to global news cycle. Suddenly, this young city had an ancient past and a larger identity. I remember artist Jose Bedia was also very excited about this finding so I took him to the site a couple of times and we had a magical time sifting through the oolite and finding artifacts that belonged to the Spanish and to the Tequestas. It was one of my most satisfying experiences for me in Miami because it reminded me of Puerto Rico and its indigenous Taino Culture and the importance of immersing yourself in the history of the place you live in. I think Miami found its way again in part because of the Miami Circle archeological site.

There is a simple saying that I like to live by. Know where you come from to know where you are going.

Katerina: I love that. But they didn't see what you saw.

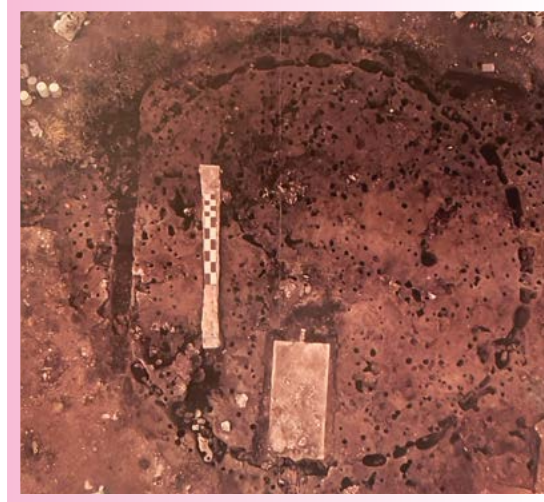
Carlos: Many didn't. So they tried to belong to another place, New York, Berlin, Los Angeles that made sense for them.

Katerina: But that also speaks to the fact that there wasn't an infrastructure for them here, right?

Carlos: There wasn't a lot, and I get it. But I always thought a creative environment was more important than infrastructure.

Katerina: True, but the rent was no longer cheap so they didn't have a real reason to stay.

Carlos: Well yes, but there were still many reasons to stay. Yet, we started seeing a lot of the artists leaving for greener pastures where they could get support and earn a living. That's very important. I struggled. I come from an interesting last name, but we had little money to spend. I worked as a superintendent and cleaned buildings during this period just to support myself. Many artists from the South Florida Art Center decided to leave Miami.



Miami Circle National Historic Landmark



The Bank at the corner of Flagler St and NE 1st St, Miami.

architect Alberto Latorre, who later on became my studio director, and still is to this date. I studied architecture and we both thought that the merging of visual arts and architecture was mythical. We continue collaborating on projects. He is so brilliant and his experience and help as an architect is invaluable. We had a blast in The Bank collaborating.

Katerina: I bet! It's beautiful to collaborate with your partner in that way.

Carlos: Yes.

Katerina: How did the DASH students come into the picture?

Carlos: I always wanted to support up-and-coming artists, in the same way that other artists had helped me when I was younger. I was involved in a DASH internship program mentoring artists in the studio. Daniel Arsham was one of them. He would help me with my plaster of Paris sculptures and he was very interested in our architectural collaborations. Back then, Daniel wasn't one of my best interns at all. He was young and he was doing drawings of trumpets. He would sneak these trumpets into our commissions! In a mosaic fountain I was working on, he sneaked a trumpet shape with all the Taino and Tequesta symbology I was using. He was driven.



Eventually many of the kids from DASH start hanging in the studio, even after graduating, and at some moment they asked if they could curate an exhibition at my studio.

Katerina: Who was around?

Carlos: Artists like Bhatki Baxter, Tao Rey, Martin Oppel, Bert Rodriguez, Leyden Rodriguez-Casanova and, of course, Daniel Arsham. They were getting inspired by the Bank Space. So they all intervened. Each artist took a cubicle. Bhakti's installation was in and around the safe deposit box Leyden exhibited a file cabinet loaded with files of people that had his same name, he pulled them from the internet, which was so fresh back then.

Katerina: Did the studio have a proper name?



Miami Circle archeological site



Carlos: At some point, we started calling it The Bank. I always thought that it was from this space that The House comes out of, but who knows. These young artists saw the potential of having their own alternative place. They needed freedom, without asking anyone's permission. They were young, there was a rebellious spirit.

Katerina: They were also talented and resourceful.

Carlos: Agree. Creative forces activate tenacious individuality.

Katerina: Yes, individuality. You also have a largely immigrant population in Miami leaving oppressive regimes.

Carlos: Exactly. A large portion of the population here knows what it is to

lose your freedom of expression, to lose everything, for real. It happened to them, not in some novel or the news. That is why Miami is so tolerant of other people's different views.

Katerina: Absolutely. The spirit of Miami is freedom.

Carlos: And then we have to say also too, that the idea of gentrification was oppressive in a way.

Katerina: Yes.

Carlos: We came from diverse backgrounds, some children of exiles or immigrants. We participate with mainstream cultures, but sometimes these could be very removed from our own culture, so it was important for many of us to work in the margins and I think to remain authentic. And avoid much of the noise.

Katerina: Authentic and very anti-establishment too.

Carlos: In a way yes.

Katerina: That was the punk DIY culture of the time.

Carlos: Something like that.

Suddenly, the younger artists start opening alternative exhibition spaces like The House. And Jose Diaz is doing exhibitions in a condo, Worm-hole Laboratory. Slowly some galleries start opening again. We start avoiding the beach as it no longer has the vibe. Some galleries in Coral Gables were doing interesting things but there wasn't an exciting vibe. Keep in mind that when the beach starts getting gentrified, mostly by developers, Craig and Scott Robins start offering artists free studio spaces in the Design District, where Craig owned a lot of the properties. These offers continued through my time in The Bank. The Robins brothers managed the Española Way Art Center in the 80s and 90s which provided affordable space to artists like Miralda, Craig Coleman, Roberto Juarez, who was also with Robert Miller Gallery, and others.

Katerina: Right, with Kenny Scharf.

Carlos: Yes, Kenny had his space there too. Craig had the foresight to start acquiring places in the Design District, with all its empty design stores. The Design District was gentrified since I can remember. It had some cutting-edge design shops but by this time they were moving someplace else. For me, it didn't have a force, it didn't have enough history, it didn't have a culture and valid architecture. I liked downtown Miami because it had more history, with the river, the Tequesta settlement and more.

*The Sears Building, curated by Robert Chambers, August 19 - September 23, 2001*  
The House

Photo courtesy of Natalia Benedetti

Installation view of Jose Reyes, *Ready to Serve*, 1999 at Box

Photo courtesy of Box Archive

Katerina: And also, downtown Miami for you was more of what had inspired you on the beach, which was these old, abandoned buildings.

Carlos: Oh, yes. That is so clearly said thank you. While some artists begin to move to the Design District, Craig expanded his offer to new energy of artist-run spaces like Locust Projects. I remember visiting Cristina Lei Rodriguez at her studio and many other artists.

Katerina: And there was also Box.

Carlos: Yes, Box was started by Leyden Rodriguez-Casanova, Manny Prieres, and Jose Reyes around 1996 and closed in 2004. Naomi Fisher and Hernan Bas had Bas Fisher Invitational. Fascinating things were happening. There was an amalgamation of tradition and history with many disciplines and the new and avant-garde. It was like a Tropicalia, a bit like the beach back then. It was fresh, but not underground. The House was special. It was like Imperfect Utopia; a salon, alternative exhibits, performances, art video projections, it was also fun. And it was great because it helped them develop their language.

Katerina: Yes, artist-run spaces do that. That's why they're so special. You can feel the difference.

Carlos: I remember one of the greatest forces back then was overdevelopment. The cranes were everywhere...constantly building. And these artists were rapidly exploring these important issues about Miami in their exhibits.

Katerina: They moved into The House in 2000 then they lost their lease in 2003 due to development. There was a wrecking ball crane outside and I think it was like a "Destroy The House" kind of party.

Carlos: If I remember well, they were having it up until the very last moment we all knew it was going to be destroyed. And the agreement was like, "You can have this until we sell the land", funny that was usually the offer with most artists, that is how it happened with The Bank. I moved from several studios because artists kept improving the neighborhoods...! The Bank is now a high-end condo. My old studio on Lincoln Road rents now for \$40,000 a month. Back then, the landlord wouldn't even come to pick up the rent check. So once again artists just left Miami. It was like, "Oh, no, We're losing the new voices. We're losing the new language." But Miami had unique energy, you can't help but be in the present here, so, again, many artists returned.

Katerina: What would you say was different about Miami during this time?

Carlos: We used to say then that the best thing about Miami was the airport... I started working a lot from the rainforest in Puerto Rico. I think things in Miami started to change because of the Miami Circle, as I said before, and when a younger group of artists returned to Miami after going to art school somewhere else. So there were more of us! These included some artists I mentioned before, like Naomi Fisher. They were embracing Miami also, its unique crisp light, pink flamingos and all. So I could relate to them with my artwork. Albert and I promptly began collecting some of these artists work within the capacity of our small budget. Some of these artists also became friends.

Katerina: And they did come back stronger, in part, with the help of the Knight Foundation and Craig Robins, who gave free spaces for over a decade before developing the Design District. Some of which, blossomed into well-established non-profits : Diaspora Vibe (DVCAI), Locust Projects, Dimensions Variable and Bas Fisher Invitational (BFI).





Carlos: During this period, besides The House events, I recall going to Dimensions Variable and the opening of Diaspora Vibe. Rosie was monumental in the sense that she was looking into the Caribbean, expanding the narrative of Miami and owning it. Most of us come from the Caribbean and South America, so it was appreciated by the artists. There was a place called the Food Culture Museum, which was also close to the Design District it belonged to Antoni Miralda, and his wonderful partner

Image courtesy of Naomi Fisher's Archive

Montse Guillen. And Albert and I had moved finally blocks away from the design district, on the edge of Wynwood. We moved to a sea foam green house that Robert Miller Gallery bought. So many things happened in the district with this gathering of creative forces, from installations and performances to parties and backyard barbecues!

Katerina: Jason Hedges' BBQ's!

Carlos: What I see in general is a transition into organizations and organizing.

Katerina: Yes, taking it into your own hands.

Carlos: Cultivating our own voice, and keeping close to those who have similar visions, again. But it's interesting, after a while, it was becoming different in many ways. And there was a lot of competition. Like who was hanging out with, and who was copying who with their artwork.

Katerina: Cliquish.

Carlos: Oh, cliquish. Wow, that's a very good word. And remember, many of these places began as vehicles for our own works.

Katerina: Right, that's how artist-run spaces typically function, they are an extension of your practice.

Carlos: Exactly.

Katerina: When I spoke with Westen about Locust Projects, he was saying that they had originally, same as you, gotten studios but had too much space. And they were using their own funds to print the invitations and to put the exhibitions together. It was a labor of love. Naomi had a studio in the back of Bas Fisher Invitational (BFI) during the Buena Vista years. I think it's generous that on top of your own studio practice, you would want to share your space with the community and put other people on.

Carlos: Yes, there comes a moment when you are doing okay, you feel confident and you can start giving. Not only that, you start getting influenced by the artists around you.

Katerina: Your community.

Carlos: Yes, it is the exchange of ideas in our art factories. And artist's works were influencing each other again, expanding and it was diverse. There were many different voices, Leyden with his minimalist Cuban themes, Daniel with architectural themes, Naomi and Cristina Lei with lushness, I can go on and on. Robert Farris Thompson, pioneer in the study of Africa and the Afro-Atlantic world, once wrote about my artwork during this time that the Caribbean was a school for me, "where everything has been always mixing and bending"...I thought about Miami in that way.



BBQ in Palm Lot

Photo courtesy of Jason Hedges

Katerina: It had fracturism.

Carlos: You are great! Yes, it had fracturism! And we were talking to each other in more or less in the same way visually. I put together this show at J Johnson Gallery in Jacksonville, Florida called *Miami Visions of Now*, including the artworks of Leyden Rodriguez-Casanova, Wendy Wischer, Daniel Arsham, Charo Oquet, Glexis Novoa, Pepe Mar, etc. The catalog had an essay by the late Paula Harper of *Art in America*. What I tried to accomplish with this exhibit was perhaps, that there was a Miami school being formed. I raised the money privately. There weren't many foundations. We were trying to support each other. Some supportive organizations existed like the Vasari Project, Miami-Dade Department of Cultural Affairs with Michael Spring and Brandi Reddick, as well as, the South Florida Art Center, all investing in Miami arts and culture but the other ones like the Knight Foundation were just beginning to establish their grant

programs for Miami artists as well as the other alternative organizations. It seems as if the institutional academic part was soon finally coming together.

Katerina: Your generation in the '80s wasn't organizing in that way.

Carlos: We were organizing ourselves, but that support didn't exist back then.

Katerina: Maybe there was a professionalization that you hadn't received, and they did through mentors like yourself.

Carlos: That is very generous of you. Some went to great schools.

Katerina: Yes, many came from New World, Dash, YoungArts. And a lot of the artists that we're talking about got shows very early in their careers.

Carlos: Yes.

Katerina: I know that Naomi and Hernan were with Fred Snitzer in their early 20s. And that Bonnie Clearwater really took a lot of them under their wing and started showing them at MOCA. Can we talk about that?

Carlos: We needed an institution to embrace its artist community, no matter what it was. There were so many missed opportunities to show institutionally what Miami artists were doing. Bonnie at MOCA finally did just that. I think some exhibit she was supposed to have was cancelled, and luckily she thought of the artists at The House. Most of the institutions in Miami had little interest in Miami artists. Exceptions were the Lowe Museum and the occasional "summer exhibit".

Katerina: Yes, Bonnie did very important work.

Carlos: And that was influential. We were so happy that something like that had taken shape. And even though it was a small group of artists, it still had an influence on everybody.

Katerina: It brought attention to the art scene. And the exhibit garnered some good reviews in international arts publications.

Carlos: Locally and then internationally, it got well-deserved attention. And a lot of artists were coming back because the small collector's base was growing. And some artists failed because they didn't have the continuity in Miami. I benefited a lot from staying here and risking it in a certain way, you know...

Katerina: Yes, in claiming Miami.

Carlos: The good, the bad, the kitsch, the deep, the superficial, its history and the complexities of a new experiment in the states like no other. But also, you know, that once you own your reality, it becomes universal. The local becoming global, someone once said. I think a lot of artists began understanding that concept and grasping it.

Katerina: The House ended after 3 or so years but the other artist organizations - Bas Fisher Invitational (BFI), Locust Projects, Dimensions Variable, and Diaspora Vibe Cultural Arts Incubator (DVCAI)- all still exist to this day. So, they've gone through the ups and downs you started talking about with your space.

Carlos: They have the economics and the support that many artists didn't have.

Remember, Art Basel comes here because of what was already here, that so many people worked on. And even though the main fairs did not involve the Miami arts community much, Art Basel brought a lot of credibility, it was validating Miami as an international art destination, so the local institutions kind of start paying more attention to the Miami based artists. So ironic.

Katerina: Yes, the big art fairs didn't pull from Miami. They took over the city, but they didn't make it about Miami ever.

Carlos: I am grateful to have exhibited in the main fair several times and benefited from their studio visit programs, but there should be by now, more specific art projects for Miami based artist in the main fair. It will actually be a great business decision as well. But there was, and maybe continues to be a persistent inferiority complex institutionalized that forces many of the museum gate keepers to look outside of their community too often. Perhaps because they are not very familiar with the art scene/ history of Miami as it is not that accessible. And few scholars have ever taken an interest to write a book, take a deep dive. That is changing. Albert and I live sometime during the year in Greece and Mexico, and when that's our reality, we immerse ourselves inside the culture and history of the places that surrounds us, and new museums and new curators arriving to Miami should do that.

Katerina: They look outside, instead of inside.

Carlos: Whatever art is being created in the community, is what it is. It doesn't matter if you like purple, black, green. I believe it is part of the job description of most institutions to help present it. There of course has to be some curatorial decisions, but institutional curators sometimes let their personal taste and concept dictate the vision, when actually it is the artist or artist community vision they have to represent.

Katerina: Exactly.

Carlos: Institutions in NYC, Brooklyn, Los Angeles, San Juan, have been representing and supporting their local art scene for decades. So much great art and stories in Miami that could have also inspired have disappeared perhaps forever because there were few ways of sharing it.

Katerina: All these spaces like Imperfect Utopia, The House, Box, they were curating from their community. They would collaborate with artists from the outside sometimes, but only if there was already a relationship with Miami.



El Speakeasy in Little Haiti, Miami.

Carlos: You have the artists taking care of the artists because these institutions were not doing their part. It was long overdue, 20 years ago, imagine how delayed they are now! Such much beauty and inspiration that was not documented, not archived, not shared... Behind our new studio in Little Haiti, that was designed by Alberto and a little bit of me...we have EL Speakeasy, a private art salon, exhibition space, library, party and dance place. We get to play The Cure followed by Celia Cruz like before! Here we have tried to archive memorabilia from the Miami art scene that I have kept and collected. We share it with anyone interested. Our non-for-profit, the Betancourt-Latorre Foundation, is using many of these archives for a future project titled *South Beach and the Last Underground*.

Katerina: To come full circle, what would you say made these artist-run spaces so important to the conversation about Miami's art history, and what made them so energized and different in how they operated?

Carlos: I think an artist-run space first and foremost takes the shape and form of the artists themselves. It's their world and how they see the world. There's an energy about it that I think in my case, you feel, and you want it to be expressed and it includes more than yourself. The process takes priority, being in the present and connected to the source. With Imperfect Utopia, it was the shape of things to come. You didn't know the shape but you could feel it and we as people are attracted to that, especially when a visual image is formed out of it.

Katerina: I agree, because it's an open invitation.

Carlos: It's an open invitation for creativity and experimentation that allows some to capture the essence of that time without really knowing it. Museums and bigger establishments have bureaucracy, planning exhibitions and programs years out. The artists don't have any delay. These places live in the times and in the moment. It is about new work and new visions. So artists are in a way, keepers of a certain truth.

Katerina: Beautifully said. They get to work in real time and connect to the present.

Carlos: Correct. But I am old enough to know that not everything new is great, not everything old is bad. And American culture is too obsessed with the Future, like the title of one of my exhibits, *The Future Eternal*. Too fast, too much. So it is more about balance. But you can still remain experimental.

Katerina: Yes. And innovative.

Carlos: We try to do what's in our nature, you know, at least we try. Like you said "You remain true to the mission of that organization. As long as you can." And protect that, hold on to it with all the strength and courage you have. And as I believe in God big time, I like to remain connected to the source. Sometimes art can be as simple as picking up seahells.

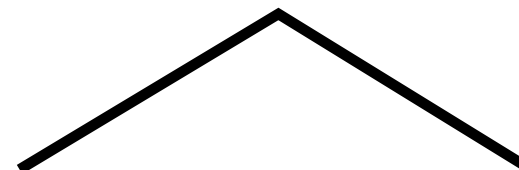


Carlos Betancourt, *El Portal* (detail), 2011



# DANIEL ARSHAM

# WELCOME TO THE FUTURE



# VIVEK JAYARAM

Vivek Jayaram: So Daniel, you were born in Cleveland and raised in Miami. When did you first leave Miami?

Daniel Arsham: I left Miami in 1999.

Vivek: That was about 5 years before I moved here from New York. Why did you leave?

Daniel: To go to school in New York in fall of 1999.

Vivek: So you left to go to Cooper Union?

Daniel: Yes.

Vivek: When you left, do you remember anything about what was happening in the local art scene around here, in Miami. At that point, in 1999, I don't think I had even ever been to Miami in my life.

Daniel: There was not much at that point going on. I don't even know if Locust Projects was open. It may have been. I had done a couple of exhibitions with a place in Fort Lauderdale that was run by our professor. So when I left for NY a lot of that stuff hadn't been formed yet, like The House and all those other things that came later.

Vivek: Right. Then you came back to Miami from Cooper in like 2003? That makes sense, because I met you shortly after that, and you were done with Cooper and you were already showing with Emanuel, I think.

Daniel: So I was back and forth, and there was a period where I considered actually taking a year off school. It's great that I didn't, but I was back and forth. I was certainly in Miami in the summers, and it was around that time, I think it was maybe 2000, around 2000 that The House was started. So when I was in town, I was involved in that, in the formation of it and in the founding of it. And obviously, I was away at school during the first two years of that. But yeah, returned to Miami in 2003.

Vivek: Cool. Tell me a little bit about The House. What do you remember your first impressions of it being? Like who was involved in it and like what was happening there and where was it? My general recollection of the time was that everybody and every thing down here was kind of just emerging. A bubbling of talent.

Daniel: The House was between 24th and 25th, one block east of Biscayne, in Edgewater. When we got it was a bit rundown. It was a white typical Miami bungalow-style house, that had a porch on the front of it that was enclosed, and we basically demolished all the walls on the ground floor and repainted the floors, making it look like what we thought a gallery looked like, and we started having exhibitions there and it became a place in once a month that we would have a big party in the backyard. We had real food and have beer and all that. And it was a gathering place for a lot of different people over that time.

Vivek: And it was also around that time, I guess around 2003 or so when you signed on with Emmanuel, right? With Perrotin. My best memories of Perrotin involved the art walks in Wynwood when all the galleries opened up I think one Saturday a month. That was a vibe.

CONVERSATIONS

MAKING MIAMI

Photos courtesy of Daniel Arsham / Locust Projects

Daniel: So I met Emmanuel in 2002, maybe. When I was back for Art Basel, and at that point we had an additional studio that was in the Design District that Craig Robins had given us.

Vivek: Yeah, I remember that. Craig was helping everybody.

Daniel: It's in a building that no longer exists, but it was basically on Northeast Second Avenue and like 39th Street. Yeah, we had the studio there and we met Emmanuel through a local collective.

Vivek: Okay. Did you know Craig Robins before you left to Cooper? Or was he somebody you met during the early Emanuel years?

Daniel: I had met him once when I was in high school, so I must have been, or maybe directly after I was probably 18 or 19 years old. I think there was like a talk that was given at another gallery that I was at. And I remember him asking me what we were up to. And there were a couple of other artists, I think Hernan Bas and Naomi already had a studio in the Design District. And so we asked him if he would do that for us too.

Vivek: Cool. And he ended up giving you space in Design District, right?

Daniel: Yeah, we had space there for multiple years.

Vivek: You and I ended up meeting probably in 2005 through Carolina. I remember the first time I met you I think was in Jenny Goldberg's backyard at that house in south Miami. I was asking you about art and you were asking me about constitutional law. I always thought that was hilarious. Not much has changed.

Daniel: Yeah, probably. I could see that.

Vivek: I think it was a party. I was playing tennis with Chris McLeod and then you, me and Chris were hanging out. When did you end up leaving for NYC?

Daniel: During all those years I effectively had a place in New York, so I would come back and forth. Some friends, Alex (Mustonen, Arsham's partner in Snarkitecture) actually had this apartment that a bunch of people, I basically just had a bed in there. I started coming back more frequently in 2005.



Daniel Arsham, *Welcome to the Future*, 2014. Installation view at Locust Projects. Photo by Zachary Balber/Ginger Photography.



Daniel Arsham, *Welcome to the Future*, 2014. Installation view at Locust Projects. Photo by Zachary Balber/Ginger Photography.

Vivek: So this book is called *Making Miami*, and it tells a story of all of you guys, all the artists that were here during those years and how that group of artists really had an extraordinary impact on making the Miami we all see today. When you think back to those years in the early 2000s in Miami, why do you think that those years ended up producing that really interesting mix of creative people and what's your impression of that time?

Daniel: Yeah, I think it's a couple of different things that I can pinpoint. One is certainly, that was the moment that all of the magnet schools were starting to produce real talent. So New World, Dash certainly, and all of us were basically starting to graduate college at that point. We all knew each other. So that's one aspect of it. I think the magnet high schools graduating students that were going to a lot of significant art colleges whether it's RISD or Cooper, Pratt, all of those schools. And then the other thing I think was a combination of inexpensive rents being available in Miami. Everyone's sort of gathering in a very small neighborhood. Everyone lived between Edgewater and Wynwood basically. It was probably within a 10 square block radius. Most of the people I knew were living there.

Vivek: Yep. I've always felt that the art made in Miami feels so different than really anywhere else because of the mix of cultures here. That and Basel have made a huge difference.

Daniel: Then the thing that really set it off, I think was Art Basel coming there. This acted as a catalyst for other people from outside Miami to want to go there and see what was happening at the beginning of Basel. Before Basel, there weren't the kind of parties and other things going on that we see every year nowadays. So before the fair arrived, people rarely visited art studios or engaged with contemporary art in that way in Miami. It's all so different now.



Daniel Arsham, *Welcome to the Future*, 2014. Installation detail at Locust Projects. Photo by Zachary Balber/Ginger Photography.



Daniel Arsham, *Welcome to the Future*, 2014. Installation detail at Locust Projects. Photo by Zachary Balber/Ginger Photography.