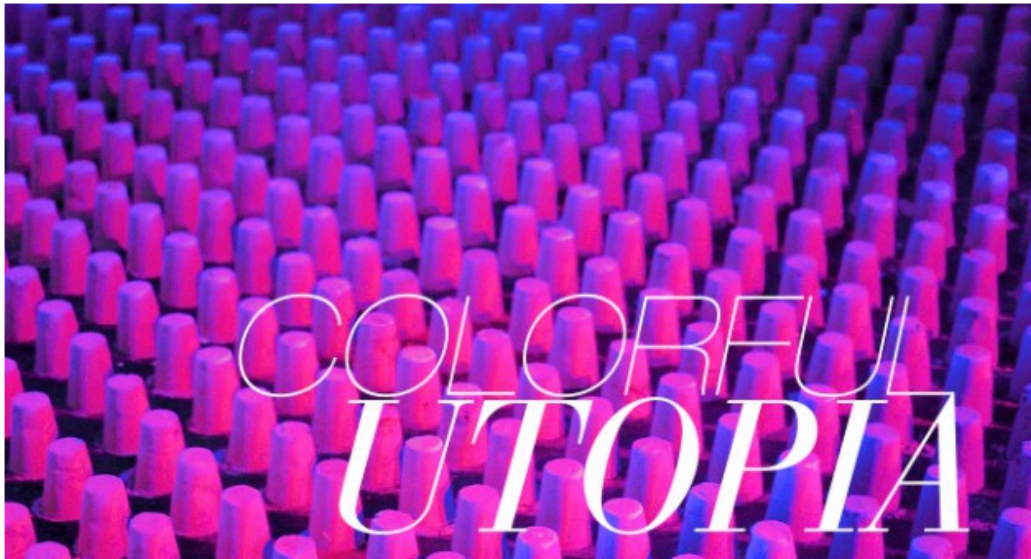


Colorful Utopia

posted by Trillionaire Magazine, 18th March 2016, Categories: Art & Culture



Carlos Betancourt is a key figure in modern art. Closer to home, he's credited with helping to launch Miami's art scene in the 1980s.

By Michelle F. Solomon

The works of artist Carlos Betancourt are difficult to define, yet critics and scholars try. Interview magazine, in its review of the hardcover book that was released last October, *Imperfect Utopia*, described Betancourt's style like this: "If you like the glitz of Warhol mixed with the sharper aesthetic of Rauschenberg, you'll enjoy his work." When the artist is asked how to categorize his own work, he says quite simply – "the concept dictates the medium." As a photographer, painter, and mixed-media artist, the multi-disciplinary approach suits the Miami-based artist. "It is very liberating," he says. And as far as others labeling his work, he encourages it. "Sometimes it's better to let others describe my artwork; I learn a lot from that symbiotic relationship." He uses colors that are bold and luxurious — his art is dynamic and fantastical.

Born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, to Cuban parents, the family moved to Miami when he was in his teens in 1981. His influential studio — *Imperfect Utopia*, on Lincoln Road — is credited with launching the Miami art scene in the 1980s. Turning 50 this year, Betancourt has spent three decades creating compelling art, which museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The National Portrait Gallery, and The Smithsonian Institute have added to their permanent collections.

In Puerto Rico, a mid-career retrospective, titled *Re-Collections* — which consists of works from 2001 to 2015 — continues at San Juan's Museo de Arte Contemporaneo through April. Trillionaire talked to Betancourt about his life, his art, and his 50th birthday.

TRILLIONAIRE: I've heard you explain the similarities of Puerto Rico and Miami in your work.



Carlos Betancourt



(To be titled) for J.
Johnson, 2013

CARLOS BETANCOURT: "Both of these places mix and blend diverse cultures that provoke unexpected syncretic opportunities that are fascinating to me. On the other hand, the tropical rainforest of Puerto Rico and the constant relationship with nature in the island was very influential to me early on."

T: I am fascinated by the story of you becoming a Christo groupie when you were (how old?) at Miami Coral Park Senior High.

CB: "When Christo was working on the Surrounded Islands, I was a volunteer...one of many. I think I was 15 years old (1983) then and I was very impressed by the project and the possibilities and freedom that visual arts represented. The unusual approach to art and the fuchsia palette was captivating. I found out Christo was staying on Ocean Drive, at the Leslie Hotel, and I would go by to catch a glimpse of him, like a groupie. Instead I discovered the decaying Art Deco and mid-century architecture of Ocean Drive and the rest of Miami Beach. It was a Buck Rogers, Jetsonian community then — pretty much abandoned, but full of possibilities and optimism. I decided then that after college, I would set my art studio in Miami Beach."

T: Your work contains a lot of "memory." Do you think that's part of your DNA — Puerto Rican, Cuban-exile parents, and then a life spent in Miami?

CB: "Perhaps. It is fascinating to me to find themes associated with memory in most of my artwork. Re-conceptualizing the past in a new context helps me understand the present and be aware."

T: What do you think draws people to your work?

CB: "My realm of communicating is through a visual image, for the most part. I enjoy when others complete the journey with words. In the book, *Imperfect Utopia*, inaugural poet Richard Blanco wrote in the foreword that when he encounters some of my constructed photographs: 'I get a distinct sense of remembering something intimate, yet distant; real, yet imagined... like something I forgot to remember... and I rush to fill his photographs with my own memories, with a narrative — real or imagined...' I like to think that my work represents a sense of my freedom."

T: Is there any one piece of your art that you will never part with? Even if someone absolutely had to have it?

CB: "Probably the vintage-glass Christmas ornaments piece. Not ready to let go of that yet."

T: You were part of Miami's art scene way before Art Basel made Miami an "it" place for art.

CB: "After finishing school, I returned to Miami Beach and opened my studio on Lincoln Road. The place quickly became a hang out. It was quite an organic movement composed of people attracted by similar interests in art, music, architecture, etc.

Life friendships were being forged, and an underground scene was soon shaped, provoking and challenging established ways. Our projects were influenced by the histories of the immediate past imposed by the surrounding architecture. Aging go-go dancers and switchboard ladies mingling with poets, visual artists, remarkable drag queens, gays, musicians — everything and everybody in Miami Beach was connecting and clashing. It all seemed to be linked together by a profound need to express the shape of things to come — the future, in other words.

Eventually, New York artists, bohemian celebrities, the jet set, and models began to appear from all over and the merging continued to the sounds of Frank Sinatra, La Lupe, and Echo and the Bunnymen. *Imperfect Utopia* was in the middle of all that. The momentum lasted for a phenomenal while — at least a decade. Then, with the arrival of developers, the forces of pop culture, and mainstream armies, gentrification began."

T: You're turning 50. (His birthday is March 18.) Anything planned?

CB: "Yes....being celebrated like a jubilee, all year long. It involves nature, loved ones, and traveling, which I love to do. Hopefully and gratefully, first stop is the rain forest in Puerto Rico — super intimate and quiet time, a way of honoring this time. Greek Isles I enjoy, so hopefully, will reach the Aegean. Friends have a place in Careyes, Mexico, and I love spending some time there with nature and love."

T: You've had quite an illustrious career for not-yet-50. Any advice for someone who wants to be a "famous artist?"

CB: "Thanks. That's very generous of you. I don't know about being famous, but I can give advice to an artist on how to maybe find a unique language. Spend lots of time in the studio, working every day and night. Something will give.

Embrace your background and your surroundings, being honest with it at all cost. Allow spontaneity, and believe in something greater. Enjoy and embrace life. Be kind and courteous. And remember that art is everywhere, anywhere — all the time."



El Portal.

« [Previous Post](#) [Next Post](#) »

Share this!

