

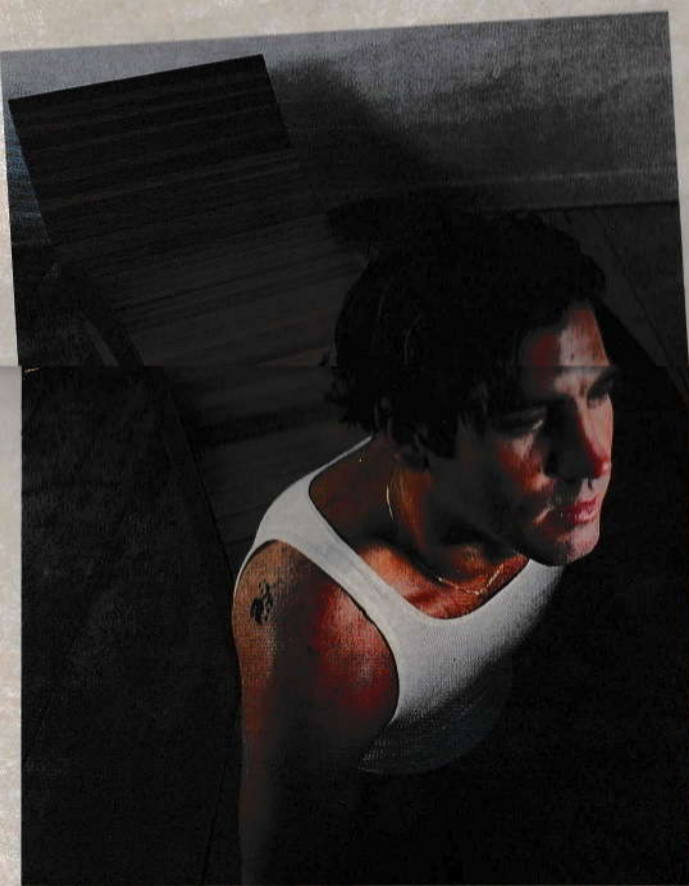
OCEAN DRIVE

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Carlito's Way

STEVEN HLAVAC



ARTIST CARLOS BETANCOURT DOESN'T CONFORM TO THE SOUTH BEACH STANDARDS OF HIP. HE DOES THINGS HIS OWN WAY, AND SO FAR, THAT SEEMS TO WORK JUST FINE.

By Jacquelynn D. Powers

SITTING ACROSS FROM CARLOS BETANCOURT, watching him and listening to him, a mix of images comes to mind: The Road Runner. Pee Wee Herman. A *GQ* magazine model. • Chain smoking, mindlessly squeezing a pink and blue-striped beach ball, the young Puerto Rican-born artist spoke freely and openly, answering any and all questions without limits, with a tendency to burst into spasms of laughter at odd moments. • A member of the old guard of South Beach (the Sempers, Avenue A, and Boomerang crowd), Carlos is addicted to this area — particularly Lincoln Road Mall. His simple but coveted lifestyle includes such mundane pleasures as snacking at the Woolworth luncheonette and venturing out into the social fray only for friends' birthdays.



How would you describe your childhood?

[Laughs] Oh my God! I wasn't expecting that. How would I describe my childhood? Happy! That's so deep. [Laughs] Happy, but I was always different.

How were you different?

Everybody always treated me different. I had a lot of freedom. I cried a lot. I was super sensitive. [Silence] I did a lot of sports. I was always painting, though.

How did you get interested in painting?

I don't have a memory. I know that I was always painting. My parents, who were conservative with everyone but me, put me through art classes. They always encouraged me. They still do.

Are your childhood and your heritage reflected in your artwork?

A lot. That's another thing about my childhood, I was always left with my grandfather from Cuba. His room was filled with Cuban things, letters to Fidel Castro. I didn't like it [at first], but by the time I was six I started to like it. I was the only one who had an interest in that. It has directly affected my work. Even to this day my grandfather sends me information about Cuba. He has a library of Cuban history.

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What type of an artist are you?

[Pause] I like new. I'm constantly changing, as you can see in my work. I'm always looking for new things. I use abstract expressionism, pop, Fauvism, all of these things mixed. I get bored very easily. I do furniture, design, inventing — just about everything.

What intrigues you about designing furniture?

I think it has to do with the academic side. I discovered furniture designing in school and I learned so much about it. When you look at Bauhaus furniture you see the designs, they are so timeless. I think it is very hard, furniture design, and I admire this guy because of the simplicity. That's where I get my inspiration from. Form follows function, things like that, and the timeless things.

What attracted you to Lincoln Road Mall?

I've been in Lincoln Road for ages, so it's very unconscious. I grew up with Miami Beach. I'm a product of Miami Beach. One of the first studios I had was by Lenox and Sixteenth, that was six years ago. Then I moved to where the *Wire* office is now. It was owned by Gary James, he used to do the Avenue A parties there. Gary gave me the space. Eventually I moved here. I always stayed around this area because it is the artists and artists influence each other. At least we used to back then. It was incredible. We all affected each other and had meetings.

So the art community isn't as close anymore?

I don't want to say anything negative. But in a certain way, yeah.

Would you like to become a commercial artist?

I DON'T SHOP AT ALL.
I DON'T SHOP AT ALL.
I LIKE HAVING
THE LEAST OF EVERYTHING.
I WEAR THE SAME CLOTHES
ALL THE TIME.

No, not at all. But there is so much...I think everything happens in a group sense. For me it's so stupid when you have to work by yourself, when by logic groups of people work better together. I think all of us are so influenced by television and the "you, you, you, me, me, me." The priorities are different. I see it. It's amazing. Sometimes it freaks me out.

What do you like best about yourself?

It's hard to talk about me, I usually let other people do that. Something that I love about myself is the compassion and caring. I get off on that. It makes me very happy that I can give and help out. Sometimes to the degree that I waste a lot of my time. Sometimes I want to change it, because it has gotten me in trouble. But I tell myself that "No one will make me not be a nice person. No matter how much it hurts it's not going to stop me from being a nice person." I love that. That's why I love that woman

Betancourt pays homage to the Latin flavor of Miami in these paintings (left and far right).

[points to the video of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*], Audrey Hepburn. She used her name for a real good thing. The day I

learned what I really could use my name for nothing else counted.

Are you health conscious?

Yes, I smoke a pack a day. No, I work out three times a week. Most of the time I eat healthy, but it is expensive to eat healthy. It's expensive and takes a lot of time. Yeah, yeah, the temple, your body, all that. I love life, I *loove* life. I protect this little body.

Where do you eat?

I think I love eating right here in my studio. [Laughs] I love it because its like a ritual. When I get my food, I get it from anywhere on Lincoln Road. I get it in here and I lock the door, and I'm alone. It's like taking a shit, the same thing. [Laughs] It is a moment of total serenity. I love eating.

Where's your favorite place to shop on the Beach?

I hardly shop. But it's Woolworth.

You can have a lot of fun in Woolworth.

[He leans in as if to tell a secret] When I want to eat bad I go there, put my little cap on and my glasses. I took my mother there recently because she used to take me there for lunch in Puerto Rico. Well, I convinced my mother that we had to go eat at the Woolworth counter. She cried for an hour [while we were there]. She said that looking at me big and remembering me as a little boy was a major flashback for her. I was so happy taking her there, and it turned out to be the biggest nightmare. But I don't shop at all. I like having the least of everything. I wear black pants and a white tank top all the time. I wear the same clothes all the time. People tell me I dress so well, and I laugh.

Are you always this up?

Yeah. I love sleeping to a certain degree. I love that feeling just before you're going to go to sleep, you know. I wish we didn't have to go sleep, though. I understand the mechanics of the human body, but why didn't God invent a body that didn't have to sleep? That's why we look at dreams and think that God is very intelligent — or whoever you believe in, Muhammed or Buddha. There must be something else to sleep besides resting your body. There's got to be something like dreams. No, but, I love the mornings, I love the nights. I love everything. Sometimes I try not to be so hyper, but I don't like being mellow. Life for me is about action. You cannot stand still all of the time. That's how it has worked for me; moving, creating, thinking. Creative people are very intense. Every day is like New Year's Eve to me. ■

One of Betancourt's not-so-practical but aesthetically pleasing furnishings.

