



# Why is Post reporter's portrait on display at Smithsonian Institution?

## ARTS & THEATER

By [Liz Balmaseda](#) - Palm Beach Post Staff Writer



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I was not exactly dressed for The Castle. I had just arrived to a snow-shrouded Washington, D.C., dropped my luggage at the hotel, and grabbed a Lyft ride to the splendid Gothic structure that had been on my wish list for more than a decade.

Now, standing before the red sandstone castle dressed in a Floridian's bundle of winter garb and dreary walking shoes, I felt unworthy to see the queen. But I stepped into the [Smithsonian Institution Building](#) (The Castle's official name) like I belonged there. Because, in a crazy way, I did.

"I'm told my portrait is in this building," I said to the guards at the reception desk. "Would you happen to know where it is?"

They seemed as puzzled at my question as I felt stunned to have uttered such a thing. The guards traded looks as I spelled out my last name. One of them gazed at me, searching my face for a clue.

“No, I don’t think so,” he said. He directed me to another guard across the room. If there was such a portrait, he said, it might be past a wide, arched doorway. The guard across the room was more familiar with that area and its displays, he said.



Behind glass: This oil-on-linen portrait of Liz Balmaseda by Miami artist Carlos Betancourt is displayed at The Smithsonian Castle building in ... [Read More](#)

But, clearly, she wasn't familiar with my face.

"No, I haven't seen a portrait that looks like you," said the guard across the room.

Ah, I thought, maybe that's because I don't look like the portrait anymore.



A selfie: Liz Balmaseda and artist Carlos Betancourt, who painted her Smithsonian portrait, share a moment at the NSU Museum of ... [Read More](#)

“Let me show you what it looks like,” I offered, tapping my iPhone screen to enlarge my Facebook profile photo, [an image of the portrait](#).



I handed her my phone. The guard studied the screen for a minute, then she lit up in recognition.

“I’ve seen this painting!” she said, glancing up to compare the image on the screen to the bundled up visitor before her. “That’s you? Seriously? I think I know exactly where this is.”





The Smithsonian Institution's Castle building houses administrative offices and a special events space. (Liz Balmaseda/  
Palm Beach Post)

She knew the portrait and its location – that was the good news. The bad news: It was in the special events hall, which was closed that day.

“No one is allowed back there today,” she told me in a firm but sympathetic tone.

“But I came all the way from Florida. I promise I won’t be more than two minutes,” I told her.  
“One minute. I promise.”





This archway leads to the Smithsonian Castle's Schermer Hall, where the portrait of Liz Balmaseda is on display. (Liz Balmaseda/ Palm ... [Read More](#))

The guard took my phone and disappeared into the corridor, past the arched doorway marked "To **Schermer Hall** & The Commons," and past the sign that said "Selected Objects from Smithsonian Museums."

As I waited for what seemed an eternity, a flashback scene came to mind, transporting me to my living room in 1994 Miami Beach: A young artist, hunched over an array of oil paints and fine brushes, contemplates a blank linen canvas.

During a brief period of my 30s, a time I now call the Wonder Weeks, there was a South Beach underground artist sleeping on my sofa. He had just closed his art studio on Lincoln Road, as commercial interests ushered out fellow bohemians on the pedestrian strip.

In the heyday of the South Beach artistic renaissance, **Carlos Betancourt**'s narrow studio proved expansive. Imperfect Utopia, as he called the storefront space where he created his vibrant collages, had been a gathering spot for creative souls and more than a few celebrity parachuters. Carlos greeted an eclectic batch of visitors that made sense only in a place like the Lincoln Road of the early 1990s: Julian Schnabel, Linda Evangelista, Octavio Paz, Morris Lapidus, Audrey Hepburn, Celia Cruz, Keith Haring, Sandra Bernhard, Rudolph Nureyev, and more.

The studio was also where the Puerto Rican-born artist of Cuban roots lived, and his was a grand life, one that cost him just \$280 a month in rent. (Never mind that he had to shower with a garden hose in the alley.)

He was fiercely curious, supremely handsome and almost ethereal in presence. And now, at my invitation, he was my provisional housemate until he could move into his newly purchased condo. Truth be told, I hoped that condo would never be ready because we were having a blast: big, impromptu parties, late-night salon discussions on bygone idols and eras, nature and freedom, all explored over Cuban picadillo and rice.

A space normally filled with the drab thuds of "Law and Order" reruns or the click of Solitaire on the desktop PC came alive with weeknight rumba. Carlos' artist friends would raid my closet and, moments later, emerge in drag to stage raucous Tropicana-style shows in my living room and balcony. And even when the place was quiet, the colors of my home seemed more saturated with Carlos fussing about.

One day as I was leaving for a friend's baby shower, I found him hard at work in the living room, dabbing paintbrushes over a linen canvas.

"It's a surprise," he said as I stopped for a look. "You'll see."

Weeks went by and Carlos continued to work on this mystery painting. Then, one day I



came home to find a Frida Kahlo-esque image had bloomed upon that small canvas, the likeness of a woman whose hair sprouted branches and whose eyes wandered off with a look that was wistful yet hopeful.

I recognized those eyes. I recognized the hair (without the branches, of course). The woman in the portrait was me – and she was amazing. Clearly her head was brimming with inspiration – so much so that it sprouted roots, then branches, then vaporous hearts that floated away in wisps of red and white.

She wore a most unusual crown, not a gold headdress but a complex system of roots that both nourished and protected her ideas. She appeared confident, this Inspired Woman, as I came to call her. She wore her curls loose and her lips red. Plus, her eyebrows were impeccable.

Her face bore the backward lettering of an artist in a trance, words that later would reveal his meditations on identity and memory.

When she was complete and properly framed, the Inspired Woman graced my living room wall and observed my life as it sparkled and dimmed that fall of 1994. She witnessed the day Carlos departed for his new home, an angular space that soon would be filled with the chatter and sounds that had swept through my house like a conga line.

She kept me company and served to reinforce the creative spirit Carlos had brought to my home. I don't remember how long I had the painting – months, maybe years – but I do remember the day Carlos stopped by with an announcement.

"I have some good news and bad news..." he said, gingerly removing the portrait from the wall.

The bad news: He wanted to take the painting with him. The good news? The portrait, like her creator, was off to grander things. The artist was on his way to a career that would lead to important exhibits, permanent collection spots that included The Metropolitan Museum of Art and a life of extensive travel.

Inspired Woman was on her way to the Smithsonian Institution.

It turns out a Cuban-born historian named Miguel Bretos had just been hired as the institution's first counselor for Latino affairs, reporting to then Smithsonian Secretary Ira Michael Heyman. Bretos' hiring had come in response to a blistering report titled "Willful Neglect," an indictment of the institution's treatment of and bias toward U.S. Latinos.

It was Bretos who approached the rising star artist who had briefly shared my home. Carlos had created a series of oil-on-linen portraits, paying homage to various artistic and literary figures, from author Sandra Cisneros to the late painter Ana Mendieta. For reasons that are still foggy to me and to the artist, it was decided the 18-inch by 16-inch painting that bore my likeness would be the one to donate to the Smithsonian.

But the acquisition process takes time. I lost track of my painting for years. Eventually, it would become part of a study collection at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. It would not share display space with Benjamin Franklin, Susan B. Anthony or Pocahontas at the main gallery. But sometime after its acquisition, it would be sent to the Smithsonian Castle's Schermer Hall, a cloister-lined space that hosts special events.

I didn't know the painting's exact whereabouts, of course. I only imagined the change of scenery must have been stunning for Inspired Woman. It would be a good 10 years before I heard about her again. Where was she? I imagined she might be in a storage room somewhere.

But then a friend called one day to report she had seen her hanging at the Smithsonian Castle. Some months later, another friend called. A couple of years later, another one saw the portrait. People I hadn't spoken to in years called out of the blue.

Years would pass before I made my way to Washington D.C. I traveled there in late January for a two-day event, and made the Smithsonian Castle my first big stop.

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Unlike the woman in the portrait, I wore no lipstick that day at The Castle. My curls were

fastened tightly in a ponytail. My glance was nowhere near dreamy or optimistic as I awaited the return of the Smithsonian guard who had disappeared through the grand archway.

I felt like those who wait outside the international terminal at airports for loved ones to appear, though, in truth, my wait wasn't nearly as long as it seemed.

Soon enough, I spotted the silhouette of the guard down the corridor. She signaled for me to come over. I raced down the hallway and into Schermer Hall, where workers were setting up portable banquet tables for that special event.

"Over here!" the guard called out, motioning toward one of the large glass cases that held Smithsonian artifacts and memorabilia.

This particular case was blocked by one of the folding tables as two event workers unrolled a large swath of white paper upon the tabletop. The workers were kind enough to move the table so I could reach the glass case.

There against a grayish-green backdrop was the portrait, one of two in the glass case.

Inspired Woman was in stellar company: She shared the glass case with a portrait of the late African-American painter Horace Pippin. Soaring above our likenesses in the wood-lined space above the glass case were two brass sculptures, an eagle and what appeared to be a large sunfish of some sort – fitting sentinels for an American woman of tropical roots.

"Liz Balmaseda, 1994/ Carlos Betancourt (b. 1966)/ acrylic on linen/ Gift of the artist/ National Portrait Gallery," read the small white card at the foot of the portrait.

Ah, 1994.

She was 22 years old, my long lost, dreamy-eyed friend. It was beautiful to see she did well for herself.

True story: Inspired Woman lives in a castle, a fortress with soaring ceilings and cloisters

and antique artifacts. And as much as I miss her ruby smile, I must admit The Castle seems to suit her and her crown of wild roots quite well.

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## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Miami-based artist Carlos Betancourt creates works on issues related to identity, memory and the human spirit. His extensive works are featured in a newly released book titled “Carlos Betancourt: Imperfect Utopia,” published by Skira Rizzoli.

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