

BETAN COUR

CARLOS BETANCOURT

When I set out to make a selection of the most recent photographs of Carlos Betancourt to be exhibited in the Spinola Palace at Tegui (Lanzarote), which unexpectedly coincided with his one-man show at the Lowe Art Museum in Coral Gables, I was not only motivated by the relationship his work has with the surroundings, nature, the surface and the body, so relevant to life and to the development of the island of Lanzarote but, more precisely by the relationship that the artist has with his ancestry, with his historical and biological origins. It was already evident in his work that writing on the skin, other lost signs and rituals are the axis through which his core narrative is maintained, but this was not the only reason to cross the Atlantic with his work. At that time I intuitively knew that there was an intense relationship between Carlos Betancourt and the island of Lanzarote. The key laid in his last name, but I had no idea that precisely in the old island capital of Tegui, right outside where I had proposed to show his photos, was the place where he would find his own genealogy and a link to a direct descendent. But why am I now interested in his roots when in past texts I have been calling attention to the surface of his spectacular photographic work?

In the essay for the catalogue that I recently published for the Insular County of Lanzarote on the work of Carlos Betancourt, I made references to the skin, to the surface, to the limits of a photographic expression "locked" in the mirror and in its own narcissist investment; leaving, however, the door opened to other deep and replicating readings but, at the same time glancing at his late grandmother, at the end of the book where hidden in the hand of the artist, is a photograph of his grandmother pointing to more hidden and enigmatic directions of the hereafter, because it pointed to a spiritual and religious place.

I mentioned his recent exhibition in the Lowe Art Museum and also the exhibition at the Spinola Palace because in both places somehow, we sense what was to come to fruition: the logical progression towards the live-performance space, a frozen ritual differed and transferred that Carlos Betancourt had been offering this previously through his still photos, surface documents loaded with desirable intentions, always sliding.

Cuando me propuse hacer una seleccion de las fotografias mas recientes de Carlos Betancourt para exponerlas en el Palacio de Spinola de Tegui (Lanzarote), que coincidiria inesperadamente con su one man show en el Lowe Art Museum de Coral Gables, no lo hice unicamente motivado por la relacion que tiene su obra entera con el entorno, la naturaleza, la superficie y el cuerpo, tan caros a la vida y desarrollo de la isla de Lanzarote sino, mas concretamente, por la relacion que tiene el artista con sus ancestros en esta isla, con sus origenes historicos, biologicos. Entonces ya era evidente en su obra, que la escritura sobre la piel, otros signos perdidos y el rito, conformaban los ejes vertebrales sobre los que se sostiene su narrativa, pero no era este el motivo unico para atravesar el atlantico con su obra. Entonces intui una intensa relacion de Carlos Betancourt con la isla de Lanzarote, por su apellido mas que nada, pero no imaginaba que precisamente Tegui, antigua capital de la isla, donde le propuse exponer sus fotos, fuera el lugar donde tambien iba a encontrar su propia genealogia una de sus raices directas. Pero porque ahora este interes por las raices cuando he llamado la atencion sobre la superficie de esta obra fotografica especular al referirme a ella en otro texto precedente?

En el catalogo que sobre la obra de Carlos Betancourt edite recientemente para el Cabildo Insular de Lanzarote hice referencias a la piel, a la superficie, a los limites de una expresion fotografica "encerrada" en el espejo y en su propia inversion narcisista; dejando, no obstante, la puerta abierta a otras lecturas mas profundas y replicantes, con un guino gemelo a su abuela difunta, al final de la publicacion, cuya fotografia en la mano del artista apuntaba en esa direccion mas recondita y enigmatica de lo ultraterreno, porque apuntaba a un espacio espiritual, por re-ligioso.

Antes mencione su exposicion reciente en el Lowe Art Museum y tambien la del Palacio de Spinola porque en ambas se inaugura de algun modo el sentido de lo que vendria luego a exteriorizarse: la logica derivacion hacia el espacio performativo vivo, ritual, ya que congelado, en diferido y transferido, nos lo habia estado ofreciendo Carlos Betancourt previamente con sus fotos, como documentos de superficie cargados de intenciones deseantes, deslizando siempre.

Si en el Palacio de Spinola Carlos Betancourt reocupaba un espacio previamente significado por sus ancestros: un espacio antiguo, colonial y ahora publico de

If in the Palace of Spinola Carlos Betancourt reoccupied a space previously meaningful to his ancestors: an old, colonial and now public space in Lanzarote (Canary Islands), – located a few hundred kilometers off the coasts of the Sahara, in “the other Atlantic shoreliner” – where his photos engaged in a dialog with the furniture, domestic scenes, the kitchen, the dining room, the halls and the chapel of his direct ancestors, reinventing the entire space – dynamically reactivating it: with his grandmother’s objects in the Lowe Art Museum, Carlos Betancourt definitively lay the groundwork that would activate his new live performance dimension, beyond the mirror the artist and his work had been looking into.

Since then, and I mean the exact moment that these objects appeared (dressing table objects, shoes, mirrors, glasses, gloves, etc), there was a change of direction in the meaning of his work, (not in his proper material works), which he would substantiate soon in Loiza (Puerto Rico), for PR’02 (On Route), and where the performing artist would hand over the camera to the spectators, giving back to the spectators the viewing power, so that they would be the ones who would define the framework of the direct action that they were viewing, so that they would be the onlookers who would return his abducted image. Loiza a town in Puerto Rico, populated mostly by people of African origins, is close to where Betancourt spent his childhood with his family. The ritual action that took place there occurred entirely in a corner of a room in a popular eatery. An old man, hired by the artist, sat doing nothing in front of Carlos Betancourt, who half-naked and stained in front of a mirror, wrote on himself. Although the old man did not intervene in any way, he appeared as relevant as the artist and the blue glitter covered grandmother’s personal belongings that were there, marking the protection and defense barriers of his backwards writing actions in the mirror in front of the only man who he had invited to penetrate the scene. The transient action which every offering opens: the milk of innocence falling on the head and shoulders of the artist from outside and in accordance with his directions, the dirt and the blue glitter in his hair, the fruit placed in a corner at the entrance of the space and the dirt that covered the floor, completes the animist referential framework and opens the doors to other invisible dimensions.

I say transient, because we still had the opportunity to see two of his interventions, immediately following this piece under the perimeters of *Context*, in Santo Domingo, where once again the shiny travelling objects that belonged to his grandmother came out of the artist’s suitcase in a street procession at a pedestrian mall in colonial Santo Domingo mixing with passersby at nightfall in a memorable architectural ruins, in the same colonial sector forming in the ground other spontaneous figures until their next showing in ARCO. If in the Afro-Puerto Rican village of Loiza the scene of the performance was deliberately vulnerable to the elements: in a semi-open space adjacent to a popular bar (I can still remember the sound that the drops of water that fell from the ceiling made as they hit the pots, buckets and containers), with his illusive walls opened to the glances of the passersby and guests; in Santo Domingo, the arches of an old palace hardly offer any protection from the sun rays that reflected themselves at will over the objects in the colonial city. The passersby volunteered to help

Lanzarote (Islas Canarias) – a un centenar de kms de las costas del Sahara, en “la otra orilla” atlantica – donde sus fotos dialogaron con muebles y estancias domesticas, con la cocina, el comedor, los salones y la capilla de sus ancestros directos, reinventando el espacio entero, dinamizandolo y reactivandolo; en el Lowe Art Museum, Carlos Betancourt dispuso definitivamente las herramientas de poder que activarian su nueva dimension performativa en vivo, mas alla del espejo en que se habia estado mirando el artista y sus obras: los objetos de su abuela.


Desde entonces, y me refiero al momento mismo de la aparicion de estos objetos (zapatos, espejos, objetos de tocador, copas, guantes, etc), presumo ese cambio de direccion en la significacion de su obra, (que no propiamente en su obra material en si), que se sustanciaria luego en Loiza (Puerto Rico), para PR’02 (En ruta), y donde el artista oficiante entregaria la camara al espectador, devolviendo la mirada a los espectadores, para que fueran ellos los que definirian los marcos de la accion directa que presenciaban, para que fueran ellos, los mirones, los que le devolverian su imagen secuestrada.

Loiza es un pueblo de origen africano, cerca de donde Betancourt paso su infancia en Puerto Rico con su familia. La accion ritual que tuvo lugar alli transcurrio enteramente en una esquina de una estancia de un restaurante popular. Habia un anciano, contratado por el artista, que estaba sentado sin hacer nada frente a Carlos Betancourt, que escribia en la esquina semidesnudo y manchado sobre un espejo y, aunque el anciano no intervenia, parecia tan relevante como el mismo y los objetos personales de su abuela que rodeaban al artista y que, rebosados de purpurina(escarcha) azul de fiesta, marcaban la frontera de proteccion y defensa de su accion de escribir inversamente en el espejo frente aquel unico hombre que el mismo habia invitado a penetrar en la escena. La leche de la inocencia que le cayo al artista desde afuera sobre su cabeza y hombros, segun sus indicaciones, como la tierra y la escarcha azul en su pelo, y los frutos dispuestos en una esquina de la entrada y toda la tierra que cubria el suelo, completaban el marco referencial animista de esta accion en transito que abre las puertas a otras dimensiones invisibles que toda ofrenda abre.

Digo en transito porque aun tuvimos, seguidamente, la ocasion de ver dos intervenciones suyas mas en el marco de “Contexto”, en Sto Domingo, donde nuevamente los objetos viajeros y brillantes de su abuela salieron de una maleta del artista en procesion por una calle peatonal del Sto Domingo colonial y se mezclaron con los transeuntes y acabaron al ocase en una ruina arquitectonica memorable, del mismo sector colonial, formando en el suelo otras figuras espontaneas hasta su proxima presencia en ARCO.

Si en la villa negra de Loiza (Puerto Rico) el escenario de la accion era deliberadamente un espacio semiabierto y popular, anexo a un bar y vulnerable a los elementos (recuerdo las goteras y su musica en las palanganas, cubos y recipientes), con sus ilusorias paredes abiertas a las miradas de los transeuntes e invitados; en Sto Domingo, los arcos de un palacete antiguo apenas protegian los objetos de los rayos

arrange the objects on the walkway making them adopt different forms and activating a very surreal and curious narrative between the volunteers and the objects, finally opening the scene to randomness and initiating a festive and warm dance in the sun with the hereafter.

 We have stopped referring to his photography since the exhibition in the Lowe Art Museum in Miami and the Palace of Spinola in the Canary Island of Lanzarote and, yet, without photography we would not have been able to initiate this story, specially without the photographs in which the artist appears with the photo of his grandmother in his left hand, which appears at the end of the book, nor without the photograph which documents the beginning of this sequence, of this ritual, in the lordly and insular palace of Teguiise, where his photos engaged in a dialog with the antique furniture and the architecture, putting in contact his "inverted" mirror ritual photos, with time and in the place of its ancestors.


His works are deliberately loaded with that spiritual dimension, beyond the live-performance invisible to it and the camera. For this reason the artist draws a slow developing process in stages, distant and different: first, in the corner of the room in Loiza, respectfully, almost hidden, cleansing himself with milk, dirt and shiny blue glitter, protected by his grandmother's objects and the light of her old candle and the inverted writing of the mirror and the fruits, like an offering to the Gods and, later, in the morning, making contact in the street with the passersby and even, at night, in the historical ruin, with another also naked body with his back to the viewers. Although also naked and cornered, the artist maintains an almost secure fetal position but equally vulnerable and protected by the objects.

They are not just aesthetic ceremonies. The artist directly connects the spirit of his grandmother with his own body and with both he loads the objects and images with meaning. His photographs are also loaded by his previous civic, non-orthodox or conventional ceremonies or by his intention or faith. In any case, spirituality plays an essential very corporal, very skin deep, pantheonic, promiscuous role, that embraces his antagonistic pair: the artist's body and spirit, with his grandmother's spirit and objects.

Carlos Betancourt's objects and images have a personal implication, an open and eloquent nakedness with nature and the hereafter, with creation and sexuality, because they are fruits of his spontaneous experience with life, of his offerings as much as of his calculated capacity of ritual transference, that puts into play other attractive dimensions.

In any case, the work of Carlos Betancourt which we will see in ARCO is not the last stop in this spiritual story, more like the provisional rest in the art market of an unfinished sequence with the objects of his grandmother, as well as his photo-performance, by which he is deservedly known. **-Antonio Zaya**

de sol que se reflejaban a su antojo sobre ellos en la ciudad colonial. Los mismos transeuntes ayudaron voluntariamente al artista a disponerlos sobre el paseo adoptando diferentes formas y activando una narrativa muy curiosa y surreal entre los voluntarios y los objetos, que finalmente abrían la escena al azar e iniciaban una danza festiva y calurosa a pleno sol, con el mas alla.

 Ya hemos dejado de hablar de fotografía desde su exposición en el Lowe Art Museum de Miami y el Palacio de Spinola de la isla canaria de Lanzarote y, sin embargo, sin la fotografía no podríamos haber iniciado esta historia, especialmente sin la fotografía en la que el artista (nieto) aparece con la foto concreta de su abuela en su mano izquierda, repetida al final del libro, o también sin las fotografías que documentan el inicio de esta secuencia, de este ritual, en el palacio señorial e insular de Teguiise, donde sus fotos dialogaban con los muebles antiguos y con la arquitectura en sí, poniendo en contacto sus fotos rituales de espejo, "invertidas", con el tiempo y el lugar de sus ancestros.

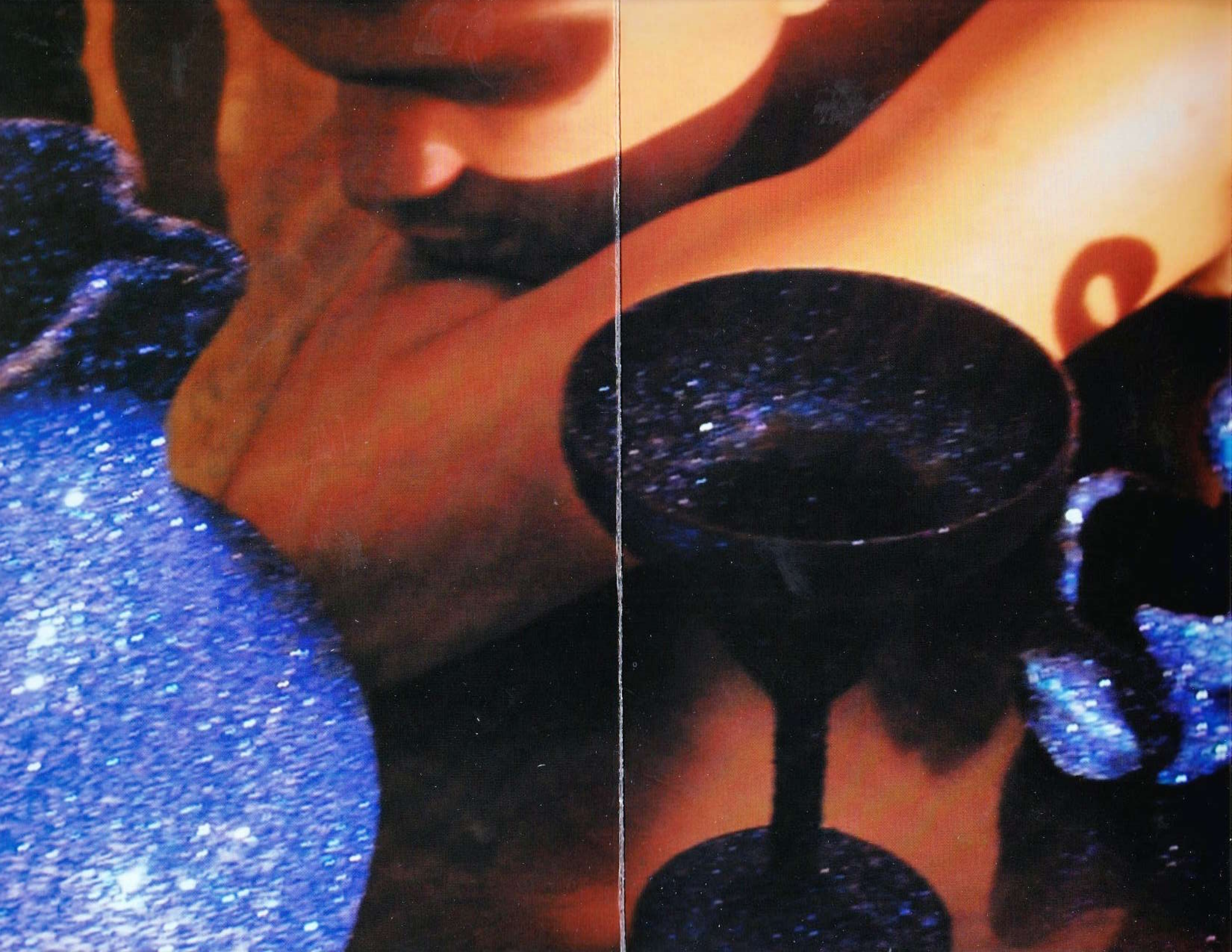
Sus obras están deliberadamente cargadas de esa dimensión espiritual, más allá de la escena en vivo e invisible a ella y a la cámara. Por esta razón el artista dibuja un proceso de desarrollo pausado, por etapas, distantes y diferentes: primero, en la esquina de la estancia en Loiza, respetuosamente, casi oculto y despojándose con la leche, con la tierra y con la escarcha brillante y azul protegido por los objetos de su abuela y la luz de su antigua vela y la escritura invertida del espejo y las frutas, como ofrenda a los dioses y, después, por la mañana, tomando contacto en la calle con los transeuntes y aun, en la noche en la ruina histórica, con otro cuerpo de espaldas también desnudo. Aunque también esquinado y desnudo el artista se mantenga en una postura casi fetal de seguridad pero igualmente vulnerable y protegido por los objetos.

No son únicamente ceremonias estéticas. El artista implica directamente el espíritu de su abuela como su propio cuerpo y, con ambos, carga de significación los objetos e imágenes de uno y otro. Las fotografías están igualmente cargadas por su ceremonia previa aunque diríamos civil, no ortodoxa o convencional, o por su intención o su fe. En cualquier caso, la espiritualidad juega un papel esencial, muy corporal, muy a flor de piel, panteísta, promiscuo, que abraza su par antagonico: el cuerpo y el espíritu del artista, con el espíritu y los objetos de su abuela.

Tanto los objetos como las imágenes de Carlos Betancourt tienen esa implicación personal, esa desnudez abierta y elocuente con la naturaleza y más allá, con la creación y la sexualidad, porque son frutos de su experiencia espontánea con la vida, de sus ofrendas tanto como de su calculada capacidad de transferencia ritual, que pone en juego otras dimensiones atractivas.

En cualquier caso, la obra de Carlos Betancourt que veremos en ARCO no es el estacionamiento de esta historia de espíritus, si acaso el reposo provisional en el mercado del arte de una secuencia inacabada con los objetos de su abuela, además de sus fotoperformances, por las que es merecidamente conocido. **-Antonio Zaya**







Carlos Betancourt, from left: *Untitled*, 2003; *Abuelita Con Su Hermano*, 2002; *Untitled*, 2002