



**CARLOS  
BETANCOURT**  
CABINET OF WONDERS:  
ORNAMENT AND OBSESSION

VENICEPROJECTS

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ORNAMENT AND OBSESSION**

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Re-Collections XV  
(blueprint neon), 2011

**With special thanks to**

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As soon as I saw *Shopping Cart Atomic* by Carlos Betancourt, a supermarket carriage overflowing with incongruous objects, covered with a uniform turquoise-colored patina, a strange recollection came to mind. It was as if I remembered something familiar, and I promised myself that I would invite him to work with glass. But it was only later, after having observed his other works, that I distinctly understood the reason for this sudden decision of mine.

Look at his blue cakes, where flamingoes, bananas, coffee pots and votive statues accumulate as unlikely decorations on sweets no one would ever eat. Or the panels of the series *Re-Collections* or *Reading Objects*, where the images of an endless heap of objects - natural or artificial - are reduced to the same color and size, later to be used to create marvelously harmonic ornamental compositions. Our gaze is captured by the unfolding of forms and itineraries, where the represented object's real nature no longer serves any purpose. Carlos Betancourt uses the most disparate objects, as if they were the letters of a mysterious alphabet. He joins them like plastic Scrabble tiles, only that he's not interested if the words make sense. They only have to 'sound' right. Thus in the end I understood the reason for this initial sensation of mine. Betancourt's works call to my mind the metal cases where, in the kiln, you deposit the glass sculptures that have been broken, or chipped, or aren't perfect. There as well you can find horses along with chandelier arms, owl heads, female profiles and shell-shaped rejects. Because glass is a material that can take on any form and any color.

Any object Carlos desires for his compositions may be made with glass. That's why I wanted to place an infinite glass alphabet at his disposal, allowing him the freedom to write in that symbolic language only he knows.

The result is *Cabinet of Wonders: Ornament and Obsession*. I am sure this exhibition marks only the beginning of Carlos Betancourt's relationship with glass, and with Italy.

Marco Berengo

Many contemporary artists use their own experiences as a platform to develop their artistic language. Intimate accounts of their lives find their way onto canvases, photographs, installations and performances. Carlos Betancourt seduces us into his 'magical world' by creating a body of work that is expressionistic, theatrical, and lush. For his exhibition at Venice Projects, *Cabinet of Wonders: Ornament and Obsession*, Betancourt presents us with a recent group of sculptures and two-dimensional works that are both tantalizing and visually sophisticated. Although continuing with his self-referential narrative, the symbols now presented are encoded in a more subtle and refined stance. The title of the show is a clear indication of this new direction and the three series of works assembled, *El Portal*, *Re-Collections* and the ready made sculptural assemblages, explore a newly discovered aesthetic language. Objects and snapshots of the artist's life and people close to him are carefully selected and arranged becoming the key to his allegorical world and ultimately, his life.

The *El Portal* series, is connected to his earlier works in which the artist or partner are in 'tropical' paraphernalia, intentionally kitsch. In these new images the subjects continue to be presented in Betancourt's characteristically baroque manner, while the intimate environment is presented in fragments. The registered surroundings are now at the forefront; and the figures become amalgamated within the compositions, emerging from the ornate sea of souvenirs and flora that invade the rooms of his home. In these works, where he documents the history of his relationships, he reminds us of Peter Beard's photo collages. Both artists develop the image associations that integrate their diaries in a similar fashion by compiling bits and pieces of daily life. A good example of this series is *Portal I*, a snapshot of the artist's studio and its surroundings. In this idyllic image, the artist is portrayed at ease in the intimacy of his space with a book at hand, in what seems to be a regular day. However, fragments of wild tropical landscapes are mixed

## ORNAMENT AND OBSESSION: THE FASCINATING WORLD OF CARLOS BETANCOURT

with his 'objects du desir'. These unexpected elements reveal a glimpse of the artist's 'persona' and ultimately the work becomes a modern day Renaissance-like portrait of the sitter. Following the historical longstanding tradition of portraiture, that extends from Greek and Roman painting, to the bold contemporary photographs of artists such as Cindy Sherman or Rineke Dijkstra, Betancourt, like some of his contemporary peers, assumes a conventional position in a present day setting. In contrast, appropriated from the High Renaissance, these 'life maps' incorporate the three quarter view pose, as well as the traditional inclusion of symbols that exposed the interests and personality of the sitter, creating what has been referenced as 'dynamic unity'- the artist's ability to relate the person being depicted to what is happening in the background. In an apparently incongruous symphony with seemingly distracting splashes of vivid colors and a flamboyant style, the main elements have been cleverly 'disguised'. Nevertheless, if we dissect the

many layers of the work, a perfect chart of the artist's life condition, up to incredible levels of intimacy, are revealed. There is a voyeuristic element in his work, and these pieces become his virtual memoirs revealed for the audience.

At first glance, his photographs seem chaotic and randomly created; but when analyzed in detail, we sense that they are cleverly constructed allegorical 'paintings'. Upon entering his world we completely get the sense of the harmony behind the agglutinating factors. Betancourt is a product of his time and context, a fusion of cultures, which include his birthplace, Puerto Rico, as well as where he lives now. By making Miami his hometown, he has been exposed to all sorts of influences. In a multicultural and linguistically rich city, the artist interacts with many traditions that eventually become part of his cultural heritage. His Caribbean roots add to the aesthetic and experiential lushness and the melting pot of his inspiring sources. The multi-references in his work are the result of his interactions with all these cultures,

**“Betancourt is a collector, a treasure keeper of memories who, in his work, ‘edits’ and re-organizes fractions and moments of his life.”**

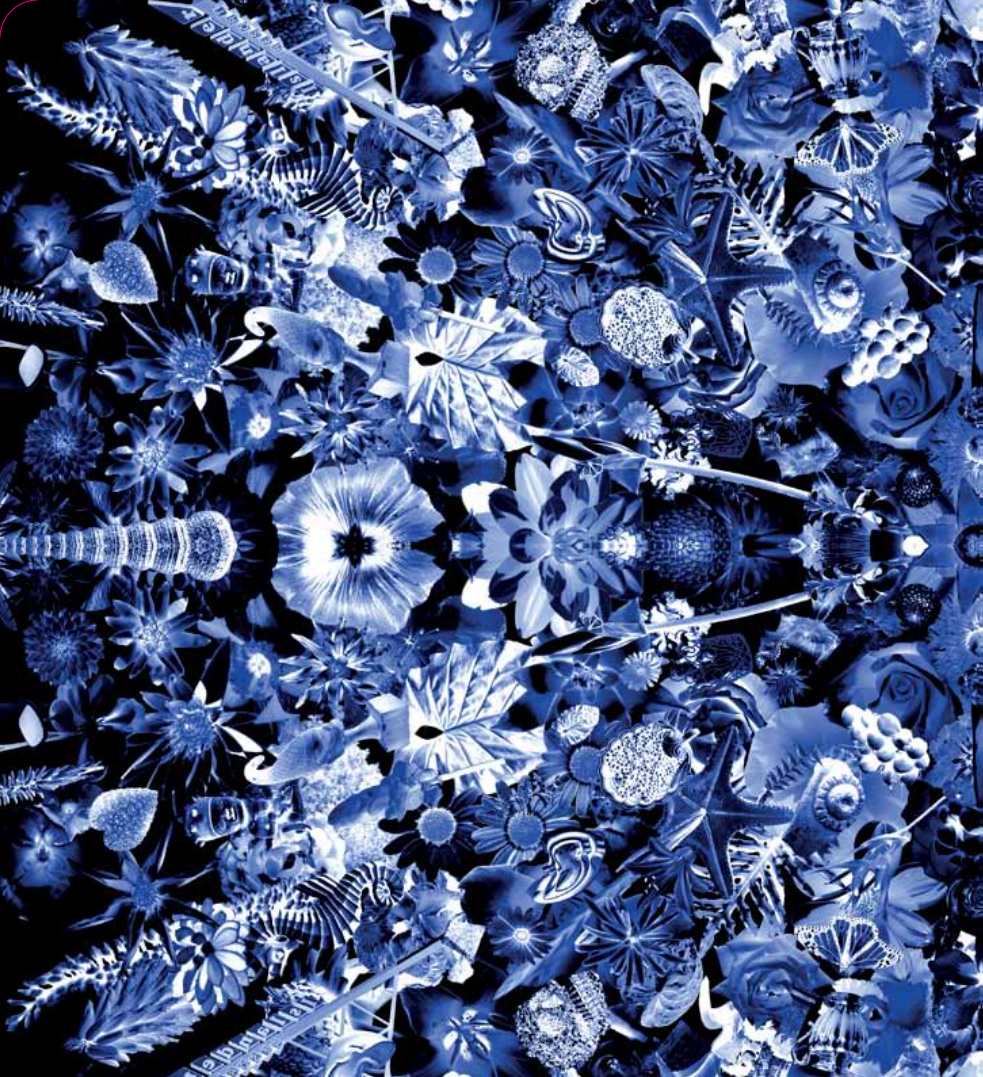
and are the key to understanding his oeuvre. *Re-Collections*, the second series of works presented, are kaleidoscopic renderings created of collected images and classified according to the artist's view. Like an anthropologist's inventory list, these captivating and digitally manipulated works present us with a glimpse of the artist's set of 'pictograms'. Floral elements, historical references, or simply personal objects associated with significant moments, are selected and re-organized in dazzling mandala-like compositions. Memories are re-created and presented in a most clever way. At first glance these beautiful flowers hypnotize us with their elegance and beauty, but upon closer inspection, a whirlwind of images seduce us. His notion of beauty is sophisticated, extravagant and timeless, perhaps a reflection of his personality. In a world where technology is at the center of our lives, where we are potentially observed at all times and where our privacy is constantly exposed through images

in social media, Betancourt's work has a vintage feel, a sense of being frozen in time. He is concerned with the past, with the effects of the passage of time, and with the ephemeral character of existence. His collages thus become his vehicle to capturing a moment or a feeling. The ready-made sculptural 'cakes' presented, display a fetishist approach to sculpture. Constructed from carefully selected ordinary objects, these assemblages remind us of Jeff Koons' works of the 80's. They are eye-catching, fun, familiar and 'sacred'. In *Cake Atomic* the sculpture seems to have been bestowed with a divine function. The inclusion of a dinosaurs, a classical bust, fruits, flowers, and butterflies, all bathed in blue, correspond with Betancourt's longing for the decorative, the ornamental, and the nonfunctional. The process of selection conforms to a very intimate system of categorization dictating how these objects come together, similarly to what he does in the *Re-Collections* series, but now in a three-dimensional composition. Inspired by the flamboyant virtue

in Latin culture, these objects become totems representative of joy, celebration, and beauty while at the same time, symbols of a particular aesthetic taste. As a vehicle to communicating his vision of the world, these sculptures, which seem accumulations of apparently loose ends and incongruous objects, present us with an intimate storyline based on his ethos, becoming the epitome of his lifetime experiences. In a sense, these sculptures are the contemporary equivalent to the Renaissance curio cabinets. The myriad of objects treasured in those, are now the collected mementos, the artifacts and treasures that are dear and meaningful to him. With these 'assemblages' and 'constructed' works Betancourt becomes the collector, the anthropologist, and the diarist. He gathers together all his memories and leaves behind a visual recollection. Venice, a city that by definition is a living and breathing urban 'curio cabinet', a place where art, architecture, and history flourished and coexisted with centuries of aesthetic adornment and richness,

is perhaps the ideal place to exhibit Betancourt's work. For this show, a new piece incorporating glass objects will be created in Murano, a shopping cart sculpture. Inspired by the opulence of the medium, colorful objects in glass will be collected and fused together in perfect unison. The city is once again the 'mise en scene', the stage for creation. Betancourt is a collector, a treasure keeper of memories who, in his work, 'edits' and re-organizes fractions and moments of his life. His recent images and sculptures offer us an insight into the labyrinths of his mind and intimately present us with the essence of the eternal Renaissance man. We discover a constant search for identity and a spontaneous re-defining of self. While his older works reflect the primal need for self-discovery and identity, the works in this show seemingly display a mature sense of existence. *Cabinet of Wonders: Ornament and Obsession*, is precisely that, a 'cabinet of curiosities', where all the artist's passions and memories are collected and exhibited.

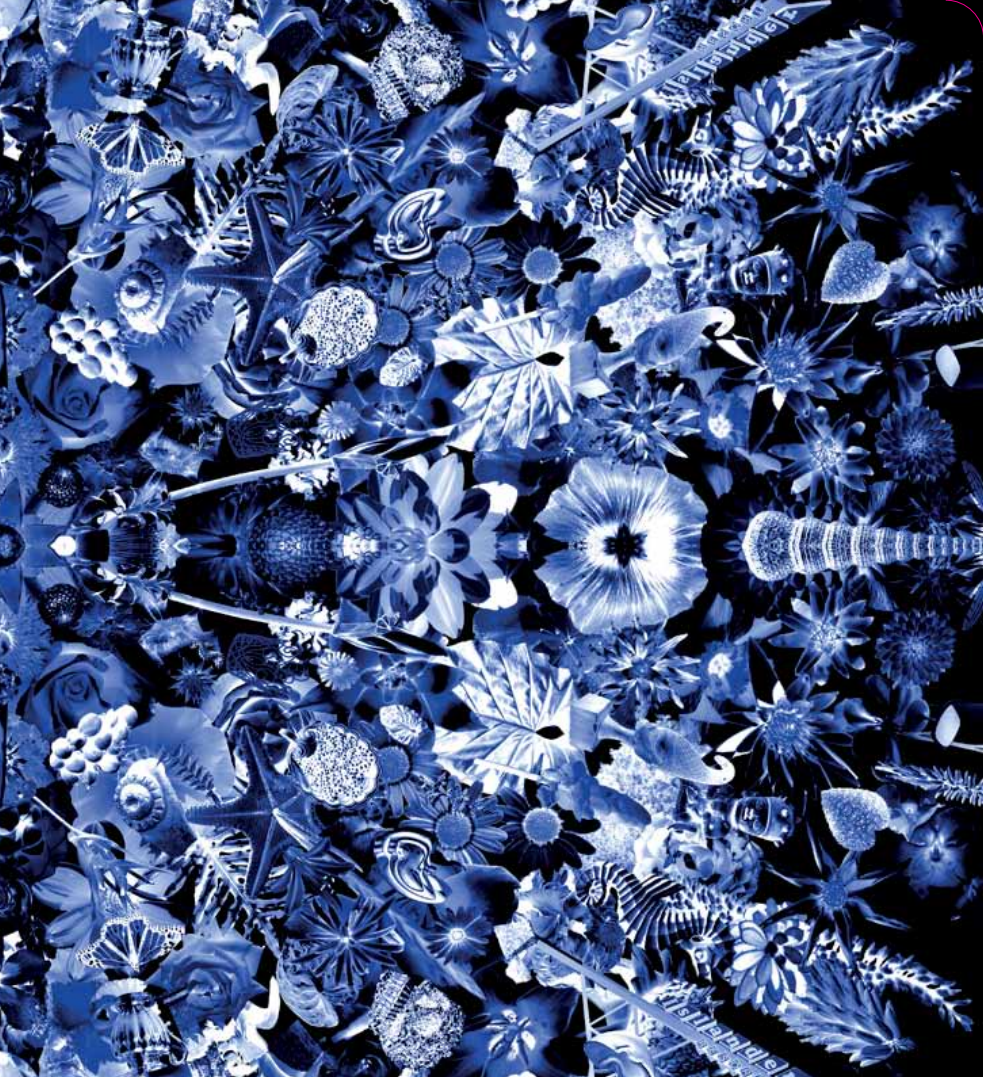
MARIANGELA CAPUZZO  
Curator, Creative Consultant



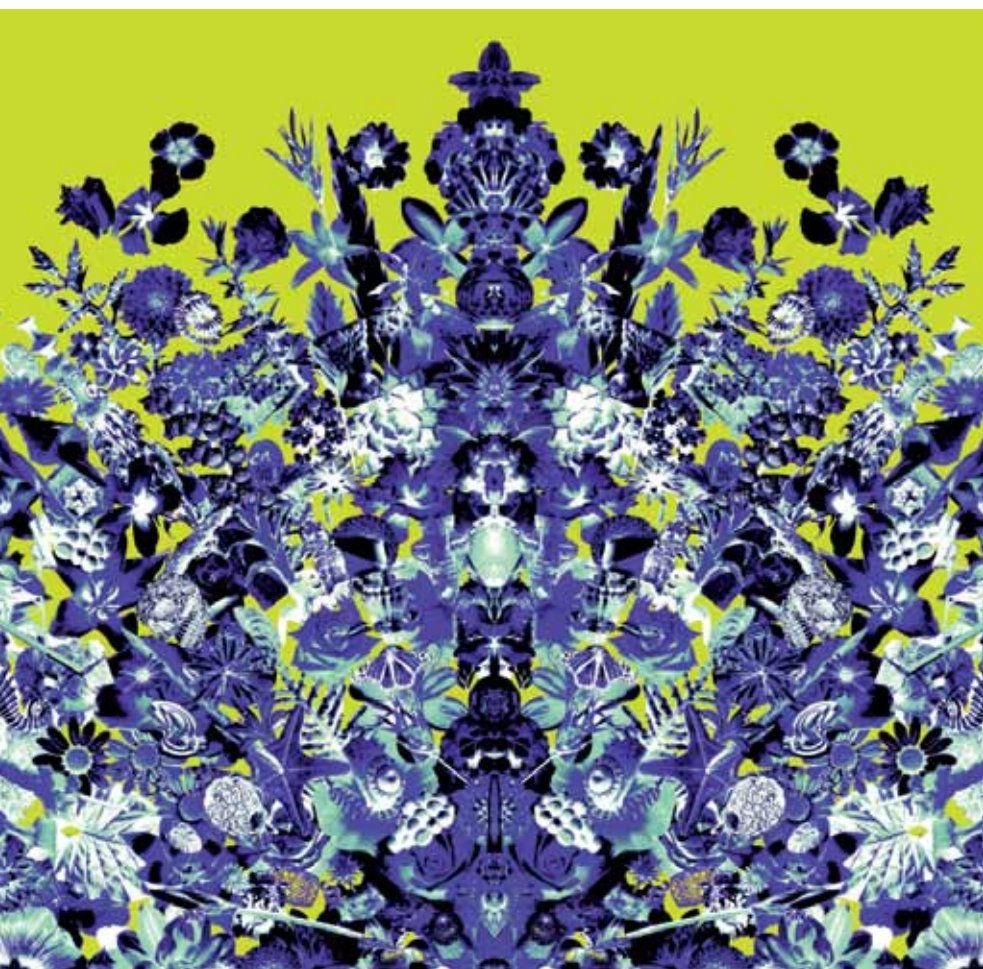
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## CABINET OF WONDERS: ORNAMENT AND OBSESSION

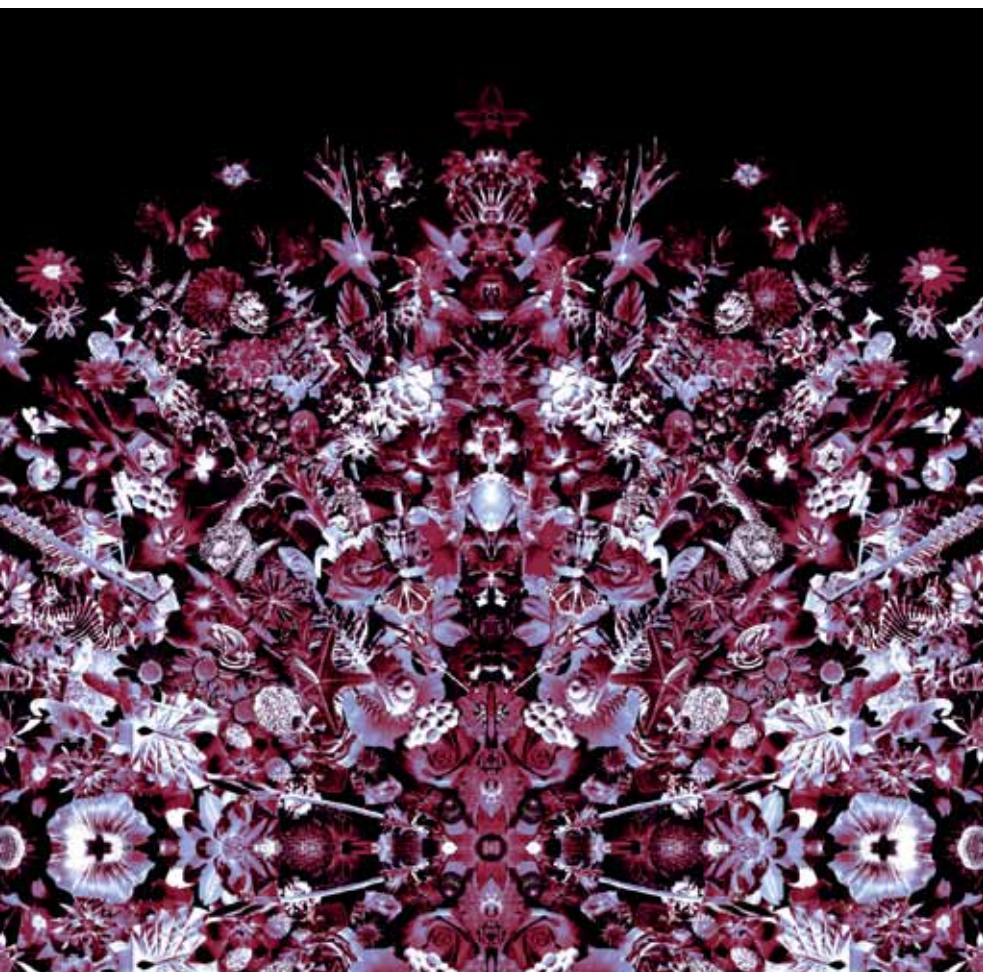




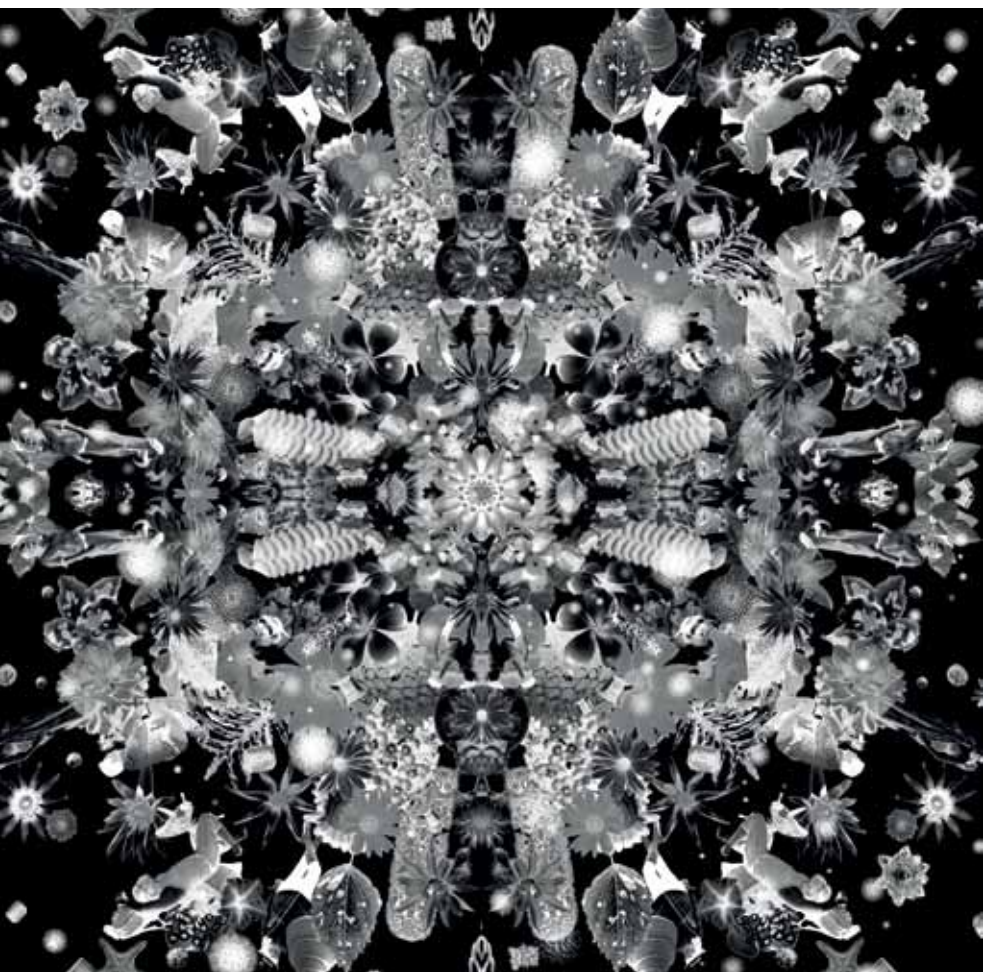
Re-Collections XV (blueprint black), 2011 / print on fine art paper  
48" wide x 48" high (detail)



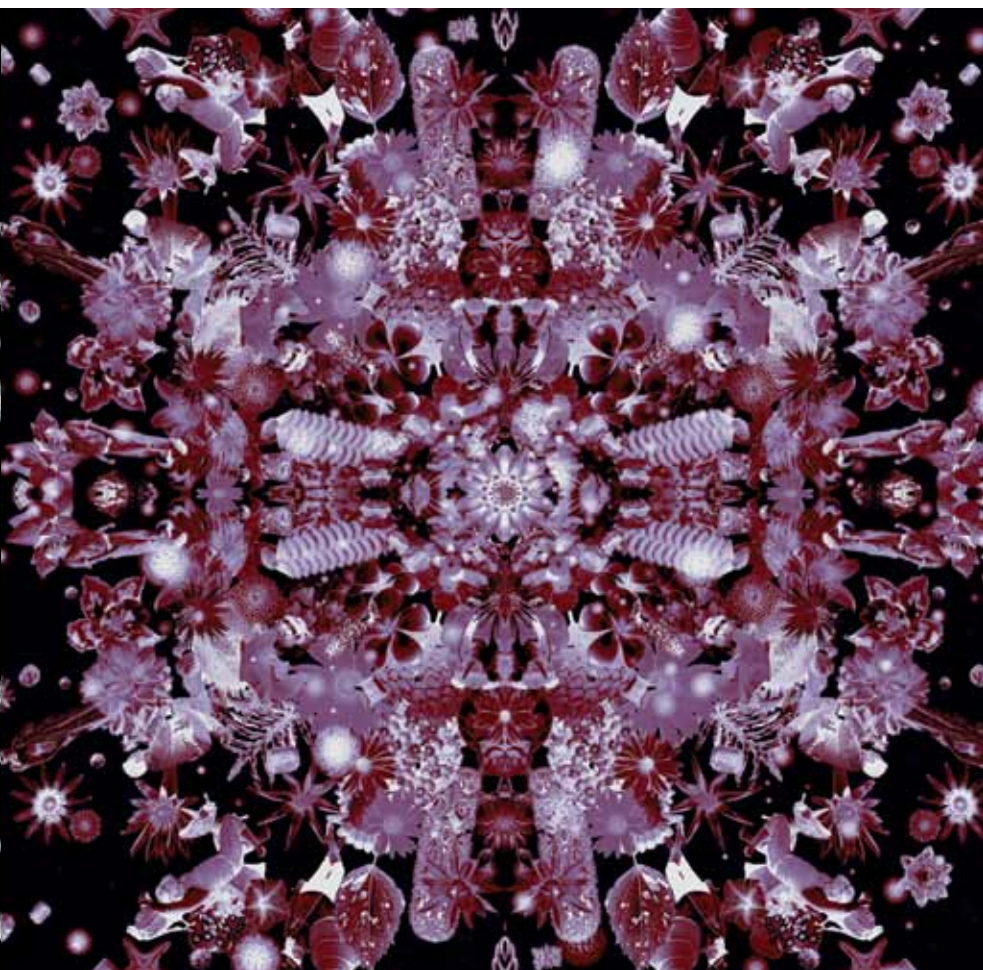
8 Re-Collections XV (blueprint neon), 2011  
print on fine art paper  
48" wide x 48" high (detail)



Re-Collections XV (vino), 2011  
c-print surfaced mounted on Plexiglas  
72" wide x 72" high (detail)



10 Re-Collections XVI Atomic (black and white), 2011  
c-print surfaced mounted on Plexiglas  
60" wide x 60" high (detail)



Re-Collections XVI Atomic (vino), 2011  
print on fine art paper  
48" wide x 48" high (detail)





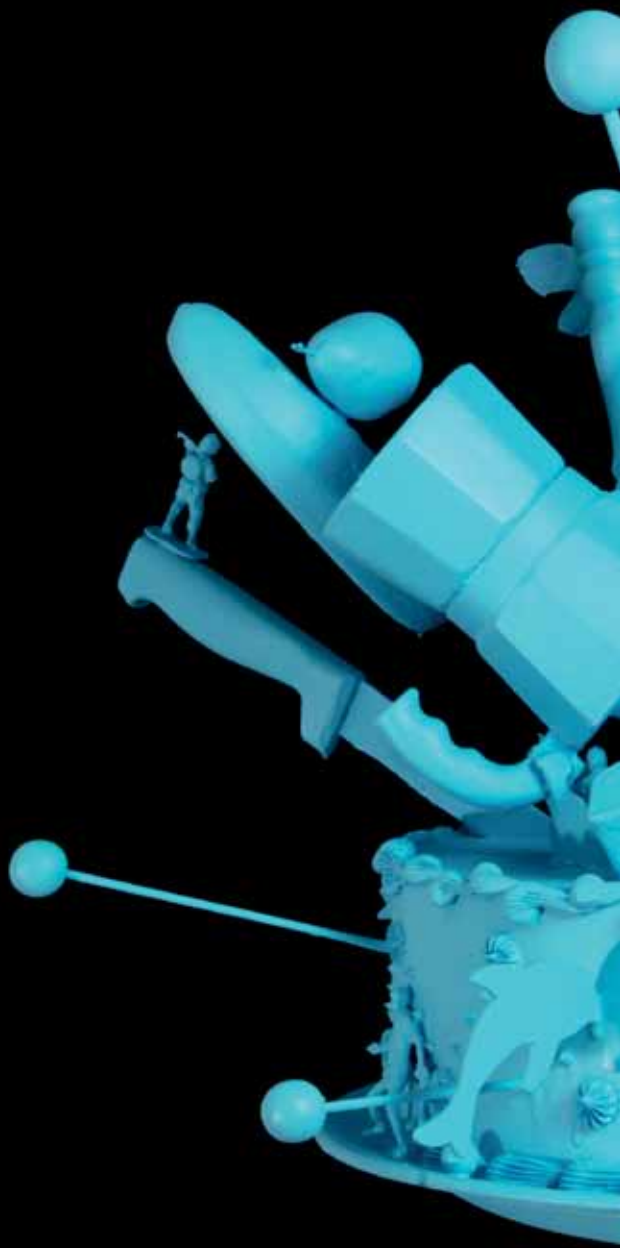
El Portal I, 2011  
c-print surfaced mounted on Plexiglas  
102" wide x 72" high (detail)

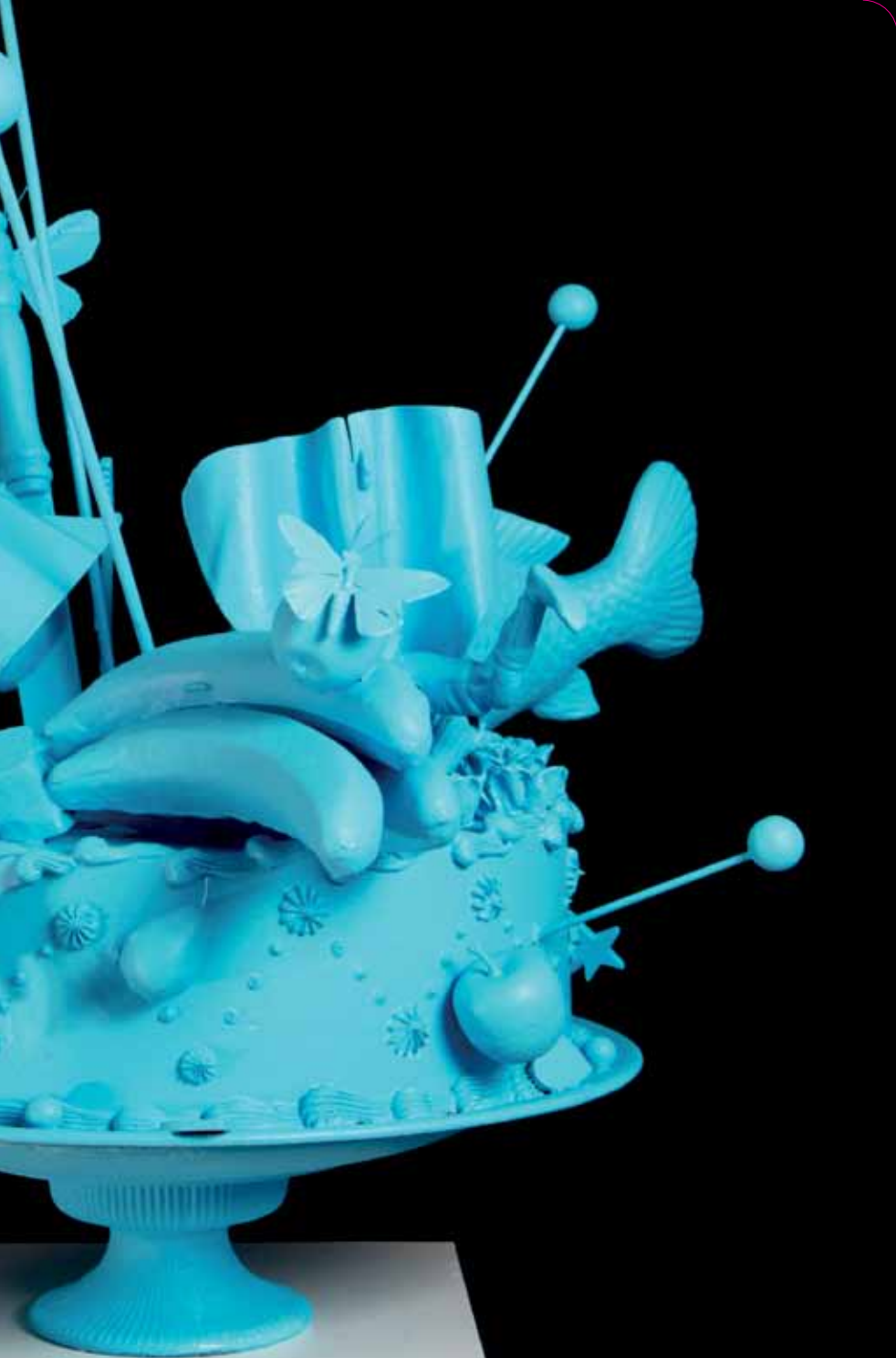






El Portal III, 2011  
c-print surfaced mounted on Plexiglas  
108" wide x 72" high (detail)





« Cake Atomic II (cafetera), 2011  
Mixed media, plaster and paint  
18" h x 22" wide x 20" deep (detail)

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Cake Atomic VII (house), 2011  
Mixed media, plaster and paint  
18" h x 22" wide x 20" deep (detail)







« Shopping Cart Atomic Art in America, 2011  
Mixed media, paint and epoxy  
18" h x 22"wide x 20" deep

22 Portrait of a Cake: Venezia, 2011  
Murano glass  
16.5" x 14.9" x 14.9" cm





## **BIOGRAPHY**

Artist Carlos Betancourt (1966) was born and raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico. In 1981 he moved to Miami Beach, Florida.

Mr. Betancourt's artwork is part of public collections such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC, the Miami Art Museum, the San Antonio Museum of Art in Texas, the Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach, Museo de Arte Ponce, Puerto Rico, the Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art, the Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno in the Canary Islands, etc. Mr. Betancourt's artwork has been included in multiple solo and group exhibits as well as art fairs such as Art Basel and Arco. He is the recipient of numerous awards and grants, including the Florida Department of State Millennium Cultural Recognition Award, a National Endowment for the Arts Grant, and the Miami Beach Arts Council Grant. He has been awarded commissions to create artworks for various Art in Public Places programs. Betancourt is co-founder of 801 Projects, an arts studio center that provides studio space for visual artists based in Miami.

He currently keeps a studio in Miami while also working from various places around the world.

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The logo for berengostudio is a green oval with the text "berengostudio" written in white lowercase letters inside it.

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