

Pax Americana

Through a trio of public sculptural commissions, Miami-based artist George Sánchez-Calderón presents the contradictory monuments of the late empire. His art speaks to the luxurious and the derelict in an ever-changing urban landscape, layered by the humorous and the serious.

By Hunter Braithwaite

A cool night a few days before Veteran's Day, George Sánchez-Calderón is at a party in his honor at the St. Regis Bal Harbour Resort, a hotel where rooms cost US\$900 a night. The Miami artist's likeness flickers off a wall of flat-screen televisions as the breakers plow shoreward off the Atlantic and waiters whirl around holding trays of gazpacho flutes spiced with manchego cheese wheels, dungeness crab salad, and miniature lamb chops. Everyone is wearing their best coat. The party is being sponsored by *Departures*, the magazine published by American Express. Technically, the gala is to celebrate Sánchez-Calderón's recent public sculptural installations adjacent to the hotel, but those who aren't woozy from

Veuve Clicquot have that sinking feeling. Nobody seems *to care* about the art.

The artist, who I spoke to while he was trying for a long moment to light a cigarette from the flame of a six-foot tall heat lamp, wasn't bothered by the pomp—he didn't bat an eye when the publisher of *Departures* opened a bottle of champagne with a sword. None of this seemed at odds with a two-decade career of making humble and socially minded art. In fact, it seemed part of the plan. “You put things out there and they have a life of their own,” said the artist, taking a deist approach to public commissions.

Earlier this year, the artist was the first recipient of Bal Harbour's *Unscripted* public works commission: a prize of US\$40,000 to create a work for the affluent

community of about 3,000. With a pristine beach, a phalanx of luxury hotels (the St. Regis being nice, but not special), and the Bal Harbour Shops—one of the most expensive, and the most profitable, shopping centers in the country—the town needed an artist to glorify its presence, to varnish its reputation as a global cultural destination: quite simply, to make beautiful art. Sánchez-Calderón is not that artist, but he can play the part.

George Sánchez-Calderón was born in 1967 to Cuban immigrant parents in New York City. Early on, his family moved to Miami, where his father ran a successful bakery in South Beach. This idea of place-making and community involvement has run through the artist's career. After his MFA in painting and printmaking from the



George Sánchez Calderón, *Americana*, 2012, stainless steel, 6 x 22'. Photograph: Courtesy of Village of Bal Harbour.

Rhode Island School of Design in the early 1990s, he produced several years worth of work that examined modernism and the found object from the position of a Cuban-American. One of the best examples from these early days was his *Cuban Armor* series (1995). For these, he cast the iconic *Guayabera* shirt in iron and aluminum. The resulting relic responds to Duchamp, in its objecthood, and to Joseph Beuys, in its social engagement. As a sculptural installation, his *Monumento* (1999) was an installation of model airplanes and a 30-foot inflatable helium pig to memorialize the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. Both of these obviously address his Cuban heritage, but Sánchez-Calderón soon shifted gears.

After moving into a rundown warehouse in Downtown Miami, Sánchez-Calderón began a period where he reflected on the shortcomings of urbanism. One of the most successful of these was *La Bendición/The Blessing* (2001–2003), where he constructed a replica of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye underneath the I-395 overpass. In this near-subterranean state, the iconic machine for living has fallen into disrepair, much like America's cities. A few years later he made *Monument/Plinth/Stoop* (2006), where he built a plywood plinth onto which individuals could climb, effectively immortalizing themselves. Both of these works, and others from that period, are deeply compassionate for the disadvantaged, and deeply critical of the systems that placed them in this predicament.

Pax Americana, the approved project, is as straightforward as they come, but like the mirrored facades of the luxury condominiums in this part of the country, a closer look always reveals something embarrassing. The first half of the project is a stainless steel sign (6 x 22') that reads AMERICANA outside the St. Regis. This is not a comment on where this country has come or gone, nor is it a jab at class relations. It is a history lesson. Before 9703 Collins Avenue was the St. Regis Resort, it was the Sheraton Bal Harbour, and before that, it was the Americana, designed by Morris Lapidus as the sequined godhead of post-war leisure.

The Americana opened in 1956 in signature Lapidus glamor. Stairways reached to pointless mezzanines. Lapidus put live alligators in the lobby to remind visitors that they were in Florida. This flamboyant aesthetic would go on to define Miami's architecture, but Lapidus was scorned in his day for creating buildings that looked beautiful



George Sánchez-Calderón, *La Bendición*, 2001–2003. Photograph: Courtesy of the Artist.



George Sánchez Calderón, **MONUMENT/PLINTH/STOOP**, 2006–2010. Photograph: Courtesy of the Artist.



George Sánchez-Calderón, *Cuban Armor*, 1995, cast iron and cast aluminum. Photographs: Courtesy of the Artist.

but whose structures were caviated via sugary ornamentation. Sánchez-Calderón explains the architectural community's dismissal of Lapidus: "It is just about image, about iconography, it's flat. Architecture is not sculpture: it has plumbing. With Lapidus, form does not follow function." Form is glamor, photographic potential. Indeed, when he died in 2001, every review contained a variation of the phrase "obscene panache."

Still, there is something undeniably ahead of his time. By brazenly sampling from the architectural buffet, Lapidus pre-dated the appropriative pastiche of Postmodernism by a good quarter century. Beyond that, his works stir with drama. He understood that buildings are characters, theater. "He was a set designer, so it makes sense that I am drawn to him," says Sánchez-Calderón. "I make *tableaux vivants* that people complete. The city is my set, Bal Harbour is a set, and it feels like Disney because people don't realize that."

Sánchez-Calderón's sculpture is simple enough. But folded into this simple gesture is a many-voiced response to America's recent history. To approach it, we should return to the party at the hotel. The art was seen as pure decoration, and this is the brilliance of it. From the back or sides, the support system and outlines of broad letters lend it a Hollywood iconography: a code that, when viewed from behind, promises the secret revelations of backstage. However, when viewed head-on, the way people will,



George Sánchez Calderón, *Levittown*, 2012, wood, steel, digital print, 16 x 20'. Photograph: Courtesy of Village of Bal Harbour.

the mirrored surface reflects the bushes across the street and renders it naturalized. This is how absorptive this town is. You can't make a 22-foot sign stick out.

When asked what the word "Americana" means to him, Sánchez-Calderón immediately historicizes the idea. "It's not in the present, the word itself is nostalgic. Nostalgia is not real." It is something that is settled, but perhaps that is a myth as well. The difference between kitsch and high art is the promise of unforeseen consequences. Kitsch is packaged, art isn't. There is no right reading. "I would never tell someone how to interpret the piece," says the artist. "Public art can never aspire to that. You can make objects that allude to certain ideas; there are certain visual cues, but that's as far as it goes."

Another narrative that runs through Bal Harbour's history is that of the small, planned community. Before it was Bal Harbour, it was Bay Harbour, and before that, it was used by the United States Army Air Corps in World War II to house prisoners of war and to train soldiers. After the war ended, the town fathers housed the residents in military bunkers while applying for their incorporation, which came in

1946. The most famous planned community in the country, and perhaps the world, occurred a year later on Long Island. The community, Levittown, is now synonymous with the American Dream.

Sánchez-Calderón underscored this connection by creating a model of the house out of half-inch plywood. At 12 by 16 feet, it is about 80% of the original's 20 by 30. "It's an icon of itself. There is no door, no windows. That's the point. It can cease to be at any moment; it's like Lichtenstein." It is, except the Ben-Day dots have been replaced with digital pixels. Sánchez-Calderón pasted the plywood with a digitally created plastic skin

of images—a door, windows, a boarded façade, and roofing shingles. There is even a spigot on the back of the house alluding to Duchamp's *Fountain*.

The spigot revives an argument central to American history. What is genuine? Who's taking credit for what? How far back can we trace our lineage? Another image channeled—one that better echoes these questions—is Sherrie Levine's *After Walker Evans: 2* (1981). This is not the famous re-photograph, the one of Evans's portrait of sharecropper Allie Mae Burroughs up against a clapboard wall in 1936. In the one I'm thinking about, Allie is with her husband Floyd and their five children. The rough-hewn wooden planks come through the photograph, splintering the eyes. Floyd looks into the camera with dime-store pugnacity; this could very well be their first family photo. The window is boarded shut. The harshness of this allusion speaks to the difficulties, and simple graces, of home life. However, the art historical level complicates everything. Both the *Levittown House* and the *Americana Sign* are thinly veiled appropriations. The artist shifts from being a creator to an organizer. In the canon of modern art history, they are found objects—things put into place to test our faith in systems



Sherrie Levine, *After Walker Evans: 2*, 1981, gelatin silver print. Image: Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

and the systems themselves. Found art depends upon a social contract between the artist, the institution, and the viewer. There must be an agreement, a consensus that *this is art*.

Beyond this, creating art in the public domain, far from the echo chambers of the academy, leads to an unavoidable relationship with the real. During the installation of the Levittown house, a public relations official placed a few flowers in front. "I said they looked good, but they had to put them all around the house. She said they didn't have to. They'd photograph the rest, and it would look good in pictures. This is the fallacy of presenting an image without the real object. I make all of this without a gallery, so nobody could say it's fake," says Sánchez-Calderón.

The proximity to the Bal Harbour shops begs another question. What are the details of the social contract that allows for luxury goods? It is one of capital and consumerism, of course, but how is it executed? Desire of beauty + exclusivity = faith. The linchpin is exclusivity. Sánchez-Calderón, whose work has long been about urban issues, insists on having accessible art. However, he wasn't allowed to print that it was free and open to the public. The strength of this program was based on the velvet rope. It was very simply about exclusion. Of course, this doesn't mesh with the history of American life, especially if you ignore the histories of segregation both nationally and locally.

To stay with equation for a moment: Faith in luxury goods equals faith in capital. Many don't remember that Adam Smith's "invisible hand" was actually that of God, and that, beyond devotion, the stunning yet invisible, immaterial power of global markets is the closest we as a society have come to the divine. How to bring this into the fold? How to monumentalize this in the same artistic gesture that critiques domestic America and the mythology of luxury hotels?

The Centrust Sign wasn't part of the Bal Harbour commission; it was commissioned as part of Miami Art Museum's *New Work Miami 2013* show, and is as much a tombstone as it is a monument. Today, Miami is known for starchitecture, with visionaries like Zaha Hadid, Herzog & de Meuron, and Frank Gehry casting buildings about like breadcrumbs. But back in the 1980s, the first inkling of this cosmopolitan presence came in the form of I.M. Pei's Centrust Tower. In 1991, the *New York Times* called it "without



George Sánchez-Calderón, *GenTrust*, 2009-2012. Photograph: Courtesy of the Artist and Miami Art Museum.

a doubt, the most striking building on the Miami skyline ... [which] glows in the nighttime sky." Too bad the bank got caught up in the Savings and Loan of the 1980s. By the time of the *Times* article, Centrust chairman, David Paul, was being sued by the US government for \$30 million.

Banks and bankers fall apart, but their Teutonic architectural gestures remain. Sixteen years after Mr. Paul was convicted on 68 charges ranging from fraud to conspiracy, Sánchez-Calderón was driving his pickup around Wynwood, Miami's

rough and tumble gallery district. This was 2009, a thoroughly different Miami, but from the cabin of his pickup, the artist saw a familiar sight in the back of the shoe warehouse. The 15,000 pound, seven-foot-tall granite sign for the Centrust building. The owner of the shoe company had bought it at auction and had been trying for a decade to sell it for the granite.

Sánchez-Calderón spent the next three years trying to buy it from him, having succeeded in the fall of 2012. Now, the sign has been moved to the neglected public space outside of the Miami Art Museum in Downtown. If the Americana sign speaks to the luxury class, and if the Levittown house to the middle class, then the Centrust sign speaks to Neoliberal Capitalism, the whirlwind that allowed for both of these moments in history, and caused their demise. Its placement at the bottom of a public building in Downtown is just as thought out. That part of Miami is simultaneously derelict and up-and-coming, just as these objects both mourn institutions of the past, and point to interpretations of them in the future. The plurality of interpretations is the point. "Public sculpture has these layers, but it can't force viewers into specific didactic readings," Sánchez-Calderón told me. "It forces the artists into being comfortable with appreciating the different readings." Δ



Transporting the GenTrust sign. Photograph: Courtesy of the Artist and Miami Art Museum.

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