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HYPERALLERGIC

An Urban Oasis Hides Ancient Mysteries in Bustling Downtown Miami

Ishmael Bermudez has spent half a century excavating the "Well of Ancient Mysteries," a tranquil and historic site, in the backyard of his childhood home.



Left: The well containing the spring (all images by the author for Hyperallergic). Right: Ishmael in front of his home, the Well of Ancient Mysteries

Hidden between the high-rises, the traffic jams, the signs promoting Miami's Brickell neighborhood as though it's a lifestyle — between all this energy-draining commotion — there's an almost-secret, nourishing, and quiet space. The "Well of Ancient Mysteries" is a small spring in a bed of limestone. You have to kneel on the craggy, coral-encrusted rock to reach it. Scoop the water into your palms and it hits your tongue with a bright, bursting alacrity: cold, mineral-y, fresh. It tastes clean.

The well is in the backyard of Ishmael Bermudez's childhood home, a structure built in 1920 and covered in paintings and murals by his late partner, Burke Keogh, who passed away last year. Bermudez, who's also known as Golden Eagle, has excavated the property so deeply over the past 50 years that it's become an obstacle course of limestone, filled with holes the size of your foot — bumpy as the surface of the moon, but warm and musical with birdsong. Besides the spring, he's discovered animal bones, nuggets of gold, arrowheads, and, he speculates, artifacts belonging to the Tequesta, an indigenous tribe of eastern Florida.



Dara Friedman during the blessing ceremony at the Ancient Well of Mysteries

In 1998, long after he began digging, the Miami Circle was discovered just six blocks north of Bermudez's home. This loop of 24 holes carved into limestone bedrock is believed to be a Tequesta structure, between 1,700 and 2,000 years old. Its discovery effectively placed Bermudez's Ancient Well of Mysteries in a City of Miami Archaeological Conservation Area. According to a *Miami New Times* story, when the Miami Circle was found, tribal representatives stayed at Bermudez's home, holding meetings in support of the site's preservation.

The flora surrounding the Well of Mysteries partly obscures it from the street. Nothing else looks quite like it, an anachronistic, fairy-tale gingerbread cottage in the city's financial center, surrounded by tall pines and lush mango trees. I visited in February, when filmmaker Dara Friedman invited locals to attend a blessing ceremony on the property after a screening of her 2014 film, *Ishmael and the Well of Ancient Mysteries*, at the Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM). In the film, Bermudez discusses his five-decade excavation and the strange magic of his home. (The screening and subsequent visit ran concurrent Friedman's exhibition *Perfect Stranger*.) The ritual itself was short — Friedman blew into a seashell four times, facing a different direction with each vibration, in honor of the north, south, west, and east.

Bermudez stood beside her, telling us about the dangers of water contamination, the dire need for everyday folks to protect and care for the environment. "The first thing I learned from Ishmael," Friedman said, "is to see the earth, and our ground, and where we are ... as a body, to *knowit's* a living body." She turned to him. "The second thing I learned from you is commitment and staying power to what you know is good and true. The ability to stay, and hold a space — it's not a searching, but a keeping."

"This is how I was brought up," he explained. "We have to share this with the whole world. We have to work together, because it's the whole earth that's suffering ... This is a tiny ecosystem. A micro-reservation." Later, I asked him when he was born. He caught on to my agenda immediately. "I'm just a Taurus," he smiled. "An earth sign. That's why I'm chosen to do this. But believe me, it wasn't easy."

Born in Colombia to a Colombian mother and an American father of Navajo and Pueblo descent, Bermudez has been digging for nearly the entirety of his life, shortly after the family arrived in Miami when he was eight. Collective fears about the Cuban Missile Crisis — and the depletion of resources like clean water — prompted Bermudez's sixth-grade teacher to task him with the responsibility of finding a spring in his neighborhood, connected to the Biscayne Aquifer. He didn't find the spring, not right away, but that he uncovered objects at all led him to believe his yard was a "spiritual vortex," a sacred space.



The excavated landscape.

He finally found the spring seven years after he started digging, at age 19. His neighbor, Queenie, a Comanche Seminole woman who acted as his mentor, insisted he would find water near a cypress tree on the property. Queenie, who'd grown up in Oklahoma after her parents were forced off their land in Florida, had heard stories about an ancient spring, something akin to the Fountain of Youth. "She was the meanest woman, but the most kind woman you ever imagined," Bermudez says in Friedman's film.

He did locate a cypress tree stump underneath his house, but the spring didn't come until a hurricane split a mango tree in the corner of the yard, an experience he also describes in the film. After cutting it down, rainwater wouldn't pool in the remaining pit: instead, it would swirl and disappear. As the *New Times* described it, he loosened the stump with a crowbar, pulled out a taproot, and unplugged the source. The water began to flow upward. Bermudez eventually located a pear-shaped limestone rock; this, he says in the film, was the well's plug. He's been drinking from the spring ever since.

In 2015, the *Miami Herald* published a story about Bermudez's fight for his property. Developers wanted to buy it, then valued at \$1.8 million, but he refused to sell, saying that the land's history was too important to obscure with another high-rise. International news outlets covered the story; Bermudez told local publication *The New Tropic* he felt unhappy "about recent press coverage, some of which has focused entirely on his refusal to entertain offers from developers to buy his property." He explained to writer Maria de los Angeles, "The truth is about the water. Life is about the water." Three years later, he still refuses to budge.

Downtown Miami, Bermudez told me, is a microcosm of the whole universe. "What's here are the remains of an event that took place 280 million years ago. An asteroid hit the earth and penetrated maybe 27 miles into it. Heat and temperature changes caused millions of hydrogen bombs. The earth blew up; it cracked like an egg. Everything that was alive is gone. You're encased in lava, water. The minerals filter the water for millions of years. All of these, surrounding you, are fossils. You have to study everything in order to be able to explain it."

Archaeologist Bob Carr, the founder of the Archaeological and Historical Conservancy in Florida, gave a talk at the PAMM following the screening. He believes there's validity to some of Bermudez's beliefs — the Tequesta dwellings and, more significantly, the value the land contains. In the *New Times*, he called Bermudez's efforts "a welcome contribution to preserving the past and creating a sense of Miami's history."



Coral, rocks, and other ephemera.

Bermudez is right about something else: the Well of Ancient Mysteries is a kind of vortex. Nearby, skyscrapers and construction cranes make the city less livable for all but a wealthy few. But here, even the noise is kept out by dense bougainvillea. Bermudez's property engenders a sense of time travel, when water purity wasn't a romantic concept but a fact that necessitated real gratitude. He mentioned a few threats to humanity after the blessing ceremony — the storage of radioactive waste under the Biscayne Aquifer, the zika virus, gentrification — and alluded to their systematic underpinnings, their roots in human actions. They constitute his largest concern: that we've stopped seeing each other as part of the planetary ecosystem, and no longer see the planetary ecosystem as part of us. The spring, like the property, is a microcosm of a world that needs our care, especially if it provides for us in return. Like most relationships, our connection to the earth is at its best when it's symbiotic.

—Monica Uszerowicz