

This story begins, as do most stories about important contemporary artists in Havana, in the north-western corner of the city in the complex of buildings known as the ISA (Instituto Superior de Arte). The idea to build an art school here, on the former site of the Havana Country Club in the tony Cubanacán neighbourhood, supposedly came about in 1960 as Fidel Castro and Che Guevara were enjoying a quiet game of post-Revolution golf. The section of the institute devoted to the visual arts, designed by Cuban architect Ricardo Porro in 1965, is one of Havana's most outstanding modern architectural achievements: an undulating series of corridors and dome-roofed studios enfolding a sun-baked patio. And it's here we find René Francisco Rodríguez, taking a break from his teaching duties.

René Francisco is 48 years old and youthful, a quality not entirely surprising in someone who found a way never to leave school. "This place is like my second home," he says. "I arrived here in 1977 as a student that's why all this cement means so much to me. I graduated from the ISA in 1982, then studied here until 1989, and I've been a professor here ever since." His unorthodox teaching method, occasionally a subject of concern among school administrators, is one of the factors that make him enduringly popular with students: "My classes take place when I want them to, or when the students want them to. And sometimes we leave the Institute and the classes happen outside, in the street."

Francisco's determination to rethink student-professor interaction led him to create Galería DUPP (Desde una Pedagogía Pragmática) in 1989. Galería DUPP is, in fact, nothing like an art gallery; it has no fixed address and is only incidentally about the showing of art and even less about the selling of it. Using "Galería DUPP" as their collective identity, Francisco and a shifting group of students have produced an astonishing array of artwork over the past two decades. The DUPP project evolved from Francisco's interest in community involvement in getting artists out of the studio and into the "real world" while erasing ego from the artistic equation. Even so, more than a few of Francisco's former students, such as Alexandre Arrechea, Wilfredo Prieto and Duvier Del Dago Fernandez, have gone on to achieve artistic prominence on their own.

Francisco continues to talk admiringly and expansively about the ISA "this isn't a school where you learn to paint It's a school of ideas, where the professors try to shape the students ." And then it's time to move on.

He leads us to a neighbourhood called El Romerillo, geographically close to the ISA but light years away from Cubanacán's aristocratic pedigree. There was never a golf course in El Romerillo. Cuban workers heading to Havana from the countryside started settling here in the 1960s, and they built their houses out of whatever materials they could find (corrugated tin, cardboard). El Romerillo became one of Havana's most notorious slums.

René Francisco began coming to El Romerillo a decade ago, wandering around the neighbourhood whenever he had some time away from the ISA.

He got to know people and they got to know him. In 2003 he received a grant from a foundation in Berlin, and he came up with a plan. He would put the grant money to use in El Romerillo. But where to begin? In this devastatingly poor neighbourhood, who was most deserving? He decided to let the neighbours decide for themselves. He contacted 44 of them, and when his survey was complete, Francisco knew what he had to do. The grant money had been earmarked for an art project, but that was fine. Francisco would give Berlin an art project, and he would give residents of El Romerillo something they could use.

The first person on the list, Rosa Estévez, was one of the most beloved figures in the neighbourhood. "Rosa healed with her hands," Francisco recalls. "She was deeply spiritual. Doctors would send patients to her to be cured. But she lived in the most extreme poverty, with her son. They didn't have a toilet or anything." So Francisco got a crew together and went to work renovating Rosa's house. Rosa made all the decisions about what needed to be done. The roof was replaced, a patio was put in, closets and shelves were built. Francisco documented the project every step of the way, and blow-ups of his "Casa de Rosa" pictures were exhibited in Berlin late in 2003. Rosa died the following year, but Francisco remains close with her son, who still lives in the house.

In 2004 Francisco went to work transforming the home of Marcelina Ochoa, whom everyone in El Romerillo calls "Nin." She was 88 years old and was unable to walk, so every day her son carried her outside to sit in her yard. He would go to work then come back and carry her inside at night. "Her yard was in a terrible state full of garbage, flies, you can't imagine," Francisco says. "She just had to sit looking at this trash heap every day. So we turned it into a garden for her. She chose the plants she wanted." Nin also needed medical attention. Francisco brought a doctor to see her, then arranged to get a wheel chair for her and had her fitted for orthopaedic shoes. Francisco exhibited his documentation of "El Patio de Nin" at the 52nd Venice Biennial in 2007.

Standing with René Francisco on the main street that runs through El Romerillo, it's obvious his commitment to this neighbourhood extends beyond artistic interest, beyond what he was able to do for Rosa and Nin, perhaps even beyond the realm of the possible. When he's asked about the future, he looks around and says, "I'd love to put in a drainage system. I'd like to get funding and re-do the water mains, improve communications. Improve everything to do with hygiene. Sounds impossible, I know. But that's my work. I live in an artistic utopia."

The day ends in René Francisco's studio, where he paints. This comes as a surprise, considering everything he's done for the cause of conceptual art and community development, but, yes, René Francisco's studio is filled with extremely interesting paintings. Paint has been layered on canvas with a spatula, using a painstaking, pointillist technique. Most of the paintings have sociological and political themes. One of them shows masses of indistinguishable faces in black-and-white. Another shows seamstresses sewing flags in a mass of red, blue and white. "I like painting," he says. "I also like the work I do in the streets. It's Yin and Yang, no?"