



La Distancia: Artist brings cultural form and function to Clark-Fulton bus stop

By Karin Connelly Rice | October 09, 2025



Edra Soto's "La Distancia" across from the MetroHealth Glick Center features motifs, or rejas, that adorn many Puerto Rican homes. Courtesy of the Sculpture Center

Surreptitious Stripes, an exhibition of work by Francisco Masó (Havana, 1988), was held from July 20 to August 19 at the Connect Now Room of the Arts Connection Foundation in Miami. Curated by the North + South team (Katherine Chacón and Jim Peele), the show encompassed two volumes—twenty pieces each—from *Registro estético de fuerzas encubiertas*, a series of abstract geometric paintings that Masó produced on the basis of documentary photographs and videos of scenes of repression in Cuba. The paintings replicate the patterns on the pullovers worn

by the undercover agents in those scenes. Imported by the Cuban government and distributed to workers in political organizations, the garments with patterns of horizontal and parallel lines act as secret uniforms, often unbeknownst to the population.

Foucault's formulation of the panopticon is the cornerstone of Chacón and Peele's curatorial vision. The pullovers recreate the abstract functioning of a surveillance device that, by seeing without being seen, not only ensures control and domination, but also normalizes conduct.

Francisco Masó's artistic practice is enmeshed in the notion of the "relational aesthetic" that brings social relations and phenomena into the sphere of contemporary art. It also partakes of Tania Bruguera's conception of "useful art" by which art is applied in order to change certain aspects of society.

In this sense, and as the catalogue to the show points out, "*Registro estético de fuerzas encubiertas* must be understood beyond the local problematic portrayed by the audiovisual documents that serve as its trigger[;] it constitutes a tangible instrument of social change, of transformation of reality." The beauty of the lines of color and their patterns is what pulls us in so that we can go beyond an aestheticist vision and formulate a narrative on the tensions generated by the exercise of totalitarianism.

Interestingly, Francisco Masó is one of the few exponents of geometric abstraction in contemporary art from Cuba. He has degrees from the Instituto Superior de Arte's, from the Behavior Art School directed by Tania Bruguera, and from the Academia de Bellas Artes San Alejandro.



The first installation of "La Distancia" in Chicago in 2023. Courtesy of Tom Harris
Years later, those design styles became Soto's inspiration for the 2023 installation she created, "La Distancia/The Distance," as part of the Floating Museum's fifth Chicago Architecture Biennial.

Then, this year, through a partnership with The Sculpture Center and supported by the Joyce Foundation, Soto duplicated "La Distancia/The Distance"—as a permanent, outdoor sculpture and public bus shelter for the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority in the Clark-Fulton neighborhood.

Located across from the MetroHealth Glick Center at Southpointe Drive and Scranton Road, "La Distancia" was dedicated on Thursday, Sept. 18 with RTA and MetroHealth Hospital.

Soto says she sees bus shelters as more than just a place to wait for transportation. She says she sees the shelters as an opportunity to explore cultural identity, belonging, and the immigrant experience through public art. Soto moved to Chicago in 1998, at age 29, to earn her Master of Fine Arts (MFA) at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

"The project itself is a representation of an existing bus shelter [from Puerto Rico]," she explains. "I did some slight alterations to integrate the decorative motifs that I wanted to feature."

Those motifs, or rejas, and concrete blocks that adorn working-class Puerto Rican homes have become central to Soto's artistic exploration of cultural identity and migration.

The patterns and concrete blocks, which Soto has studied for more than 10 years as part of her broader "Graft" project, serve both practical and aesthetic purposes in Puerto Rican architecture.



Internationally acclaimed artist Edra Soto. Courtesy of Steph Murray

"They are functional, for ventilation mostly," she explains. "You can see these decorative motifs everywhere. They're part of the human backdrop in architecture."

Additionally, Soto says the graft is a type of symbolic transplant relating to immigration.

"I think about the meaning of graft as skin transplant, and then I start thinking about it in relationship to migration and how you find ways of navigating" she says. "Things like being outside your home and belonging, which artists widely explore, are strange."

She adds that finding a sense of belonging in a foreign land can be daunting. "America is composed of immigrants," Soto observes, "but we come to the United States, and we feel that we don't really belong."

Soto says the architectural components of Puerto Rican architecture and design often translate into cultural identity. She points out that tourists flock to cultural and historical attractions like El Morro in San Juan, she sees the everyday architecture of working-class communities as equally significant to the island's heritage.

"I start thinking about the decorative motifs that live in the homes of working-class Puerto Ricans as an important kind of architecture that represents working-class communities in Puerto Rico," she says.

La Distancia includes a digital journal accessible via QR code at the shelter, featuring essays, poetry, and artwork created through community workshops in Cleveland focused on migration experiences.

Local artists were invited to present their work for a group exhibition in the bus shelter.

"The journal was generated through writing workshops—focused on migration and the memories of migration," Soto explains. "You can really feel the presence of Cleveland in the journal."

In addition to protection from the elements, La Distancia has integrated seating that is designed to be a place for community members to rest and gather—often a rare feature in modern urban design.



Assembly of Edra Soto's "La Distancia" across from the MetroHealth Glick Center. Courtesy of the Sculpture Center

"Sometimes it's strange that you'll be in a public site and there's not a place to sit," Soto observes, adding that public art projects like La Distancia are connection points and collaborations. The project required coordination between architects, engineers, fabricators, and community organizations.

"Public art is very much about working with a community or multiple communities," she says, adding that she was honored by the teamwork that went into the installation.

Soto says she hopes the permanent installation will be a testament to the immigrant experience and the ways cultural identity can be expressed through public spaces. She says she sees La Distancia as providing both practical shelter and a symbolic haven—a place where Cleveland's diverse communities can gather while experiencing a piece of Puerto Rican cultural heritage.