

Interview with Franco Gaskin by Jerome Haferd and Mikaila Meurer, with Anthony Carrion

Jerome Haferd: [00:00:00] Did you ever go to Ghana? No. Did you go, you went to Africa then?

Franco Gaskin: Yeah, many times.

Jerome Haferd: Which countries?

Franco Gaskin: Um, one was, um, Tanzania. Okay. Tanzania. And then it was, um, uh, uh, Senegal

Anthony Carrion: was Senegal one?

Franco Gaskin: Senegal.

Jerome Haferd: Okay. That's close.

Franco Gaskin: And there's another one. I always forget the name. A d They clip

Franco Gaskin: Forget the name of that one.

Jerome Haferd: Dakar Senegal? Yeah. Mm-hmm. Uh, amazing. What, what year do you, was that?

Franco Gaskin: I don't remember.

Jerome Haferd: Okay.

Franco Gaskin: It's a newspaper clippings about that.

Jerome Haferd: Okay. Yeah. What did you think when you went there?

Franco Gaskin: Uh, I was well received. That was nice. I was surprised. Uh, I was surprised. Uh,

uh We need more lights.

Jerome Haferd: No, this is perfect. This is great.

Franco Gaskin: Yeah.

Jerome Haferd: This is great. Recording by the way.

Mikaila Meurer: I'm sorry. It's recorded.

Jerome Haferd: Yep. All good. So yeah, Mikaila and I are trying different interviews and we have been wanting to interview you. Uh, since you gave your lecture at the school and, uh, it's been going well with, with this young lady helping you out.

Franco Gaskin: Yes. Yeah, she's really great. Yes.

Jerome Haferd: We're lucky to have her. She's fantastic.

Franco Gaskin: Yeah. Yeah.

Mikaila Meurer: Glad you think so. I'm flattered. Yes.

Jerome Haferd: And so, yeah, we won't, we will go as long as we can. Uh, we have a few, we have, we have some questions that maybe you, you did you look at them before?

Franco Gaskin: Yeah. Yeah. But yeah

Jerome Haferd: And we can, we can do, we can kind of roll with it.

Uh, it doesn't have to be super formal. And then Mikaila and I looked at a few of [00:02:00] these pieces from the archive.

Franco Gaskin: Oh, really?

Jerome Haferd: And we might, uh, look at a couple of those when we're talking as well. And then I have my book here of the gates.

Franco Gaskin: Alright.

Jerome Haferd: Uh, okay. So let me also turn my thing on record

just in case. Okay, great. And Anthony, feel free to also ask a question. Sure. If you, okay. So we're, we are just gonna start, uh, with Mikaila. So why don't we each introduce ourselves? Sure.

Franco Gaskin: But before, let's, let's, uh. Stick to the script that you sent me.

Jerome Haferd: Yes. We'll stick to the script

Franco Gaskin: If you change the script and I don't know what to say.

Jerome Haferd: Yeah, it's all right. It's all right.

Anyway, yeah. We'll, we'll, we'll use the structure of the questions Yeah. Sent, but then feel free to add more and we can have little follow up. I see. It's really meant to be a kind of oral history more than like a newspaper interview. So we wanna kind of think through some of these questions and, and, and, and.

Franco Gaskin: Okay.

Jerome Haferd: See where it takes us a little bit. Okay. Does that sound all right? Good. Great.

Mikaila Meurer: Good.

Jerome Haferd: Okay.

Mikaila Meurer: Okay, so the first one

Jerome Haferd: So your name,

Mikaila Meurer: oh, sorry. My name is Mikayla Muer. Um, I'm a third year student at the Spitzer School of Architecture studying architecture and historical preservation.

Franco Gaskin: Mm-hmm.

Jerome Haferd: And I'm Jerome Haford, uh, assistant professor at the School of Architecture

Franco Gaskin: and well known as Franco The Great.

Jerome Haferd: Alright.

Franco Gaskin: Mm-hmm.

Jerome Haferd: Okay.

Uh,

Jerome Haferd: Yes. Okay. Why don't you start off, Mikaila. Great. Okay. What's your first question?

Mikaila Meurer: So, uh, the first thing we kind of wanted to know was a little bit about your early life, including your disability and your [00:04:00] decision to become a magician.

Franco Gaskin: Okay. Let's start with the disability first. Mm-hmm. That started from very young.

You want me to tell the whole story about—?

Jerome Haferd: Sure.

Franco Gaskin: Okay, great. Well, it started when I was about two and a half or three years or something like that.

Jerome Haferd: And you were born in

Franco Gaskin: I was born in, um, uh, colon, uh, uh, in Panama. In Panama, yes. And I was raised mostly by my grandparents. And as a kid, I climbed on a chair and climbed on the table and there I went down mm-hmm. A three story building. And, my grandmother didn't know of it, but this Spanish lady downstairs, she didn't even wait to tell my grandmother until she picked me up. And she took me to the, uh, nearest clinic, but they couldn't do anything for me because they weren't equipped to do that.

But fortunately, there was a neighbor that knows me well and she, um, she was some kind of a director or something in, in the American hospital. Matter of fact, I was born there. So it was easy for me to be ministered there. So anyways, she took me there and I was in a coma for about a month or so.

So my grandmother came, too. And man, she was so shocked. She fainted away. She fainted and hit her head on the wall. So the both of us were in the hospital together at the same time, same time. So they. My mother came to see me and everybody was crying because my head was this big, this say and and blue. And the doctor said, what are you all fussing [00:06:00] about?

You just fell out of a crib. And my mother informed me, informed the doctor, the reason why I am there crying and whatever. So they started to put ice and my head in those days, you know, they didn't have the technology like now. Right. So they started to pack my head with ice and I was, uh, I was unable to, to be conscious then.

Right. And so I spent a month or two there, I guess that that's what they say. And then after I came out, when I was able to learn to speak, I couldn't articulate enough. I was to say one word and they always called me. Dad, dad, dad. So that was the dadda. Everybody called me Dad, dad, da.

Jerome Haferd: Wow.

Franco Gaskin: So they noticed that I wasn't speaking properly.

And the bad impediment. So that, and then as I was growing up, the only thing I could like to do and to do very easily is to draw all the time. Drawing, drawing, drawing. And one figure stood in my mind for the longest time because every four o'clock I would hear them talking about— talking about the news, and it was, Italy was a German dictator, whatever he was.

Jerome Haferd: Mm-hmm.

Franco Gaskin: And, and they always talk about him

Jerome Haferd: and Mussolini and them,

Franco Gaskin: well, not much Mussolini, but Hitler was the main thing. He was like, Trump, you know? Yes.

Franco Gaskin: You know, he's the second Trump, right? Not Trump is the second Hitler. Anyway, um, I could hear them, but I couldn't. I don't say anything. And as I was growing up and the [00:08:00] conversation like, we are here now, everybody's talking, I want to say something too.

And I would be shaking the chair and. I'm trying to say something and my mother would always say, boy, stop breaking up my chair. And I, I feel so embarrassed because everybody know what I'm trying to, this

Jerome Haferd: You are three, four years old.

Franco Gaskin: No, no, no, no, no, no, no. At that time I was about six, seven.

Jerome Haferd: Okay. You're, you're a kid at that point.

Franco Gaskin: A kid, yeah. At least seven. And I used to just check the chair to talk and that was a big thing. And then as I tried to communicate with my peers, I found it very difficult because they couldn't communicate with me and I couldn't communicate with them. So it led me to be like an introvert, so.

Jerome Haferd: Mm-hmm.

Franco Gaskin: So that's all I could do, just sit down and draw.

Jerome Haferd: But you were drawing,

Franco Gaskin: Drawing all the time. That, that was my thing.

Jerome Haferd: And what were you drawing at that age?

Franco Gaskin: Hitler.

Jerome Haferd: You were drawing Hitler?

Franco Gaskin: Yes. Because he was the only person I had to talk about. Right. And it, to me, was great.

Jerome Haferd: He's famous.

Franco Gaskin: Yeah. He's famous. And I said, I want to be like this man. Yeah, yeah,

Jerome Haferd: Yeah. That's so fascinating.

Franco Gaskin: I wanted to be like this man.

Jerome Haferd: And so then you, you eventually decided to do magic.

Franco Gaskin: Well, when the magic came in, after I saw that I could not communicate with my peers that I wanted to find something that I could do, that they would be marvelous about it.

Jerome Haferd: Right.

Franco Gaskin: And I say, well, if I could do something that they couldn't do, I would attract more friends and more.

Jerome Haferd: Right, right.

Franco Gaskin: So I went to the priest, the Catholic priest, and asked him to, to assist me to buy a book. Right. A magic book. And I remember today. The book. I still have the book. Yeah. And the book cost three, [00:10:00] \$3 and 50 cents, something like that.

And then he asked me to say, I want you to study. I want to practice. And he gave me a lecture about it and I said, thank you. But it took me about an hour or two to communicate with him because I couldn't explain to him exactly what I want. But, he admired me because I wanted to do something different.

And I went every time to a priest or the church rather, at some type of event. He, he will invite me to do the magic. And he will explain to the audience first, take it easy with the kid, you know, because he's a little bit handicapped or something. And that was a good thing.

Jerome Haferd: And so when did you regain your ability to communicate, you know, normally?

Franco Gaskin: Okay. So little by little, I force myself to be always doing magic and forcing myself to communicate with people. So I got to talk. Explain what I'm trying to do. So little by little I begin to articulate a bit. And that was a great help.

So the magic did help. See, because painting was just inside, you didn't have to communicate with anyone. But with the magic, you get to go, you know? And so what the priest would do every Sunday, I would go behind the altar. It was a Catholic church. I go behind the, and and, and I give him a list of the different apparatus I need, sorry.

And he would take it out of the, uh, the, uh, the, uh, collection box and give him the money. And that was, I mean, the

Jerome Haferd: Priests are sort of magicians also. Right? Different kind of magician.

Franco Gaskin: Maybe. Well, no, he wasn't certain magic, but maybe,

Jerome Haferd: but he's a performer.

Franco Gaskin: No [00:12:00] Uhhuh. Well, well, well, yes. I guess you have an audience, so you have to perform.

Jerome Haferd: Yes. Yeah.

Franco Gaskin: So anyway, he had faith in me and I admire me for being, you know, trying to get out of this shell that I was in. Right. And I know I was in that name that they called me and put me down so much.

Jerome Haferd: And did you have a nickname at that point? Did you? Oh, yes.

Franco Gaskin: Dummy,

Jerome Haferd: Tommy

Franco Gaskin: Dummy. Dummy. 'cause if you couldn't talk then you're probably dumb.

Jerome Haferd: Wow. And did you have a magician name? Oh, Franco The Great, it was already Franco the Great.

Mikaila Meurer: Is that how Franco the Great came to be a nickname for you?

Franco Gaskin: No,

Mikaila Meurer: no.

Franco Gaskin: I wrote, wrote in the book Franco The Great at the time, all magicians. Right that, that name, you know, right. F Fantastic Houdini, whatever it is. So I said, well, I want to be great.

Jerome Haferd: Amazing.

Franco Gaskin: And so I set out to be that person.

Jerome Haferd: Amazing.

Franco Gaskin: And then when I came to the States, I started to use just Franco because I don't think the public was ready for the great.

Jerome Haferd: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Until later.

Franco Gaskin: Until later. And, and then I talked to people asking me, what is your name? Said Frank, the Great, they said, no, what is your real name?

I said, well, I only answer to Frank or the grape. If you call me by my real name, it must be the police looking. <laughter> It must be the police looking for me. Anyaway, Frank, the great, that's my and then what happened? I stopped saying Franco the Great and they started saying Franco the Great.

Jerome Haferd: Right, right. Ah, okay. It's working.

Franco Gaskin: Then they're ready to call me that.

Jerome Haferd: Right.

Franco Gaskin: And what really makes that happen? In Christmas, I'll be painting in the bars, Christmas scenes, and I can see the audience looking at me and I'm full of tricks. You know, I do things so fast. [00:14:00] They know how I did it. So I heard it in the background.

Damn. That Franko the great. I said good. They're ready. Now there. Yeah. They're ready to call me. They're so eminent. Yeah. They're ready to call me Franco the Great now. Okay. It's not that I'm imposing that name. They're ready now to receive it. Right. Right. So I begin to do a lot of tricks with the brush.

You know, and then later on I started painting blindfolded.

Jerome Haferd: Right. You know so, so let's, let's now move to this.

Franco Gaskin: Yes.

Jerome Haferd: So then what year did you come to New York? And what was, what And tell us about that and how you made it to Harlem then.

Franco Gaskin: Okay. Well, my grandmother and my father's side, I always ask her, you know, to send for me.

But she wasn't able to because she wasn't working and she didn't have the means to, but she tried her best to see if she could talk to friends and, you know, get some s together and get me over here. So one thing I always remember, she said one day she went to the church and she was telling people about me, said my grandson is coming, you know, and, and she was very proud of that. So one woman said, you mean that pimp, that pimp is your grandson? Oh my God. When she told me that story, I wanted to sink my body into the earth. You know?

Jerome Haferd: Why do you think she said that?

Franco Gaskin: Who?

Jerome Haferd: The woman who, who,

Franco Gaskin: but that's the story that people know you, but you don't know they know you.

Jerome Haferd: Right. Right.

Franco Gaskin: I didn't know that. That's when I was a pimp. Oh God. But my grandmother was the type of woman she would fight. What she said, damn, it takes a good man to [00:16:00] be a pimp. And that was a very nice reply. Good answer.

Jerome Haferd: Okay.

Franco Gaskin: But I didn't know that this was happening until my grandmother was telling me the story and I feel so embarrassed because she was bragging about her grandson, right?

And people say, oh boy, you mean a business grandson? So anyway, I, she said to me. The second week I was in the States, she said to me, son, you got to look for a job, you know, because art don't pay, you know, only once in uh, blue Moon at the village, they have this exhibition.

Jerome Haferd: And you were painting already at that point in Colon in Panama?

Jerome Haferd: Yes,

Franco Gaskin: I came prepared.

Jerome Haferd: Okay, so you were already painting.

Franco Gaskin: I was an artist in Panama.

Jerome Haferd: Got it.

Franco Gaskin: Okay. And the place is this small. I said, if I come here, the place is this big. I must make it.

Jerome Haferd: So you came here to really expand your career as an artist.

Franco Gaskin: I came here well prepared.

Jerome Haferd: And you were 20, how old were you?

Franco Gaskin: I don't remember.

Maybe 23, 24, something like that.

Jerome Haferd: So this was maybe 1958.

Franco Gaskin: 1958. I think so, yeah. Alright. So anyway, um. She said— she tried to convince me art don't pay and blah, blah, blah. I said, grandma, art is my, but that's my business. But she interpreted wrong because I use, I use a good inflection. And I, I said, that was my business.

It is like I'm telling her, don't say anything because that's my business.

Jerome Haferd: Right.

Franco Gaskin: But I didn't mean it.

Jerome Haferd: That's gonna be my livelihood.

Franco Gaskin: But that's what I do.

Jerome Haferd: Yeah. Yeah.

Franco Gaskin: But she wrote back and told my parents, my other parents that I said, you know, that's my business, you know? And so, oh my God, anyway what happened now after I started Bring the money in? [00:18:00]

I bring the money in, she said, she says, son, money's not everything you know. You say she changed. Now, see, art didn't pay right. But when said bring in the money, then she said, you know what she really wanted was company. But I couldn't make the money being home with her. I have to be outside. And just all over the place.

Jerome Haferd: And were you closer to her than your parents, in a way of speaking?

Franco Gaskin: Yes. Okay. In a way of speaking because at 17 or 18 years old, I left home because my parents, when I got that fall and the doctor told my parents that you will never amount to anything because a blow of that magnitude to the brain will be all messed up. Just leave him alone. And so they did leave me alone. So I was alone. So, but I see where if I.

Jerome Haferd: But she never gave up on you. Your grandma never gave up on me.

Franco Gaskin: Yeah. Never gave up on me and that was the good thing.

Jerome Haferd: Wow.

Franco Gaskin: But, uh, as I was growing up, I wanted to excel in something. So I always was looking for somebody that could teach me.

And, you know, I never have a chance to play with my peers. I'm always looking for somebody, mentor

Jerome Haferd: Mentors. Yeah. Yes. Yeah. And, I did find it on the TV and whatnot.

Franco Gaskin: Yeah. Well, no, I never look at TV that I looking at. Somebody could teach me. And we, we studied books and poems and, and studied everything.

And the three books that I always was in love with— it was four books. I think my own work psychology and, and psychology, and. The other one, um, psychology and philosophy and magic. [00:20:00] Those, the books I used to go to bed with all the time reading those things, but I know I, well, at this point where I was talking about what

Jerome Haferd: You were talking about New York.

Franco Gaskin: Oh, yeah. New York.

Jerome Haferd: And did you come to Harlem first? How did you make it to Harlem?

Franco Gaskin: Okay. Through my grandparents, grandmother, and came to Harlem. Landed right in Harlem and then Harlem. I walked from, from eighth Avenue to Madison, knocking at every door that I could possibly find, asking them to gimme a chance to paint something on the award for free.

So I could establish something, and they turned me down and I was shocked. I said, why? But some of my friends, this, you know, Frank, in New York, nobody does anything for free because they think you're going to come back and run the place. I said, oh. So I went downtown in a Spanish area, and I went into a Mexican place and talked to the people and they didn't want me to pay because they started to say, son, we don't have the money.

I said, I don't need the money. I just need to do something on your patio. They had a beautiful patio, and I started painting there for a month. Boy, that's the greatest thing ever happened to me. The greatest thing ever happened. I started painting there for a month. And then the place was very famous, but I didn't know that.

And so the people that work in another area, they would come there to that, them with the owners. And, so they said, you doing that? I said I had to write something and said, I'm gonna send it to my boss tomorrow. And I went, you ready? Do, do, do that. Come to see me [00:22:00] in the newspaper. Wow. Everything started opening up so many doors for me.

Jerome Haferd: And which neighborhood of New York was this?

Franco Gaskin: That was 14th street. And between nine and 10. Nine and 10th Avenue. It was a Mexican place. Mama and Papa place. And I met a lot of people there. A lot of people and, and I was very happy about that.

Jerome Haferd: So that was your first break? And then what happened then?

Franco Gaskin: Places that have always passed and always wonder about, uh, how could I get to paint that place?

Not knowing that they're looking for me. Isn't that something? I am just wondering about this place. Like, God, this place. I liked one day to paint in here,

Jerome Haferd: But they were already wanting to know who's that artist who did that work?

Franco Gaskin: No, they read about me in the papers. Oh, okay. Because the audio did a big spread about me.

And all the other Spanish places wanted to know about the Spanish, Puerto Rican. I mean, it took me three and a half years to get downtown. Never know nothing about Harlem.

Jerome Haferd: Right. So you were living here, but you were working down there,

Franco Gaskin: Right.

Jerome Haferd: And then how did you start to do painting in Harlem?

Franco Gaskin: Okay, so, one day I came uptown to a friend, to dispense some money.

Went in his bar and I started telling the lady that I could paint something on that wall. She said, hell no. You know, I mess up my wall, you know, because she didn't know my ability. She said, well, if you really wanna paint, you could paint something in the back of the bar. Or there's a glass there, like a mirror.

Right. And I started to paint something and I finish it and she called me and she says, Franko, I want you to come right away, I said, oh my [00:24:00] god. Something is wrong. And she said, no, I want you to bring her the razor blade

and trim the edges around it because everyone thinks it is a paper that I put on, on the glass.

Jerome Haferd: Oh, right.

Franco Gaskin: And she wanted to show that it was a painting.

Jerome Haferd: Right? It's a real painting, yes.

Franco Gaskin: And if I jagged edges.

Jerome Haferd: And do you remember which painting was that?

Franco Gaskin: That was, there was a, there was a Christmas scene in

Jerome Haferd: Oh, right, okay.

Franco Gaskin: Christmas time.

Jerome Haferd: And where was, where in Harlem was that?

Franco Gaskin: That was 140. 48th Street and, oh my God, eighth Avenue, seven Avenue.

Jerome Haferd: Yeah. Was this a black place? Yeah. Yeah. Okay.

Franco Gaskin: Yeah, a black owned, and those days the bar used to be very dim. You know, just like a can on the table. And we just tease those people said that, that they cannot pay the, the light bill, so they make the place look exotic, you know, with a candle light.

But anyway, I tell the lady, well, I, when she saw it, she said, well then, then you can paint something. And that wall. I said, okay. I said, what would you like me to paint? She says, can you paint the <Indistinguishable>? I said, yes, I could paint the <Indistinguishable>. But with one specific issue.

She sent away. I, uh,

Jerome Haferd: She wanted you to paint the building or the un

Franco Gaskin: Well, the old, the whole door scene of the un,

Jerome Haferd: the whole assembly.

Alright.

Franco Gaskin: Yeah. Yeah. So, but I tell her exactly. Yeah. How I could do it because the nature of the place was dark. I said, well, I could make this painting change from day to night.

Jerome Haferd: Okay. Yeah.

Franco Gaskin: And she said, you can do that. I said, yes. And that was the first big painting I did. It changes [00:26:00] from day into night. Right. People used to come into the bar and just look at the painting alone. And so, and every 15 minutes it would change back into today and then change back into night. And that was like, wow.

And now I cannot work downtown anymore. Okay. Because I was kept it, I was captured in Harlem. All the bars want me now.

Jerome Haferd: Uh, okay. And so can you talk about how you moved from painting with the bars to then the gates?

Franco Gaskin: Oh, oh, that, that came later on the gate. The gate came way later on. And then I started to paint, um, for, for the furniture stores.

Jerome Haferd: Okay.

Franco Gaskin: And then I started paint the velvet for the galleries. Then I started, do so many things and you know,

Jerome Haferd: so you were changing the medium of the paintings based on the clients, uh, you know, the relevant for the furniture stores.

Franco Gaskin: Oh yeah. Okay.

Yeah. But. There are painting that when you look through my, um, my work, you, you could never identify me with those painting because you don't think that I was capable of doing this.

Jerome Haferd: Right.

Franco Gaskin: And all the time, I was doing so many things.

Jerome Haferd: Right. And because they were your clients at that point?

Franco Gaskin: Well, yes. And

Jerome Haferd: they were starting to pay for these paintings.

Franco Gaskin: Of course, of course, of course. But I started to paint the velvet. And the reason why I painted the velvets today, whenever I walk into the, uh, to the white galleries, all I see was white European paintings.

And I take a chance and ask him if they were to display some of my work. And they said, sure. And after that, you know what I. They remove all the European [00:28:00] paintings and put all the black paintings.

Jerome Haferd: Wow. This is in Harlem?

Franco Gaskin: No, that's downtown.

Jerome Haferd: Oh, this is downtown. Okay. Downtown.

Franco Gaskin: Yeah. Because now they have a black audience, a black patronize.

Jerome Haferd: And what year is this?

Mm, that was in seventies. 71, 72. Okay. Something like that. Okay. Yet like that, that that was one of them up there.

Jerome Haferd: So this, this brings me to the part of that question about Harlem. When you moved to New York, was your identity as a Latin American or as a black person?

Franco Gaskin: Oh, black. Black. Black. Black.

Jerome Haferd: Okay. And can you talk about that, uh, your identity when you came to the us?

Franco Gaskin: Good. Okay. Let just tell you something. When I was in the white galleries and the, and some black people would come in and they wanted

to buy Franco. So the owner bit are Jewish and some of them are, or Arabs, but most of them are Jewish.

And, and the manager would says, oh ladies, if you purchase a Franco, I will introduce you to the artist. And I keep telling them, don't, don't do that. No, don't do that. And he didn't do it. So after the buy two Francos, he asked me why I didn't want me to be introduced. I says, they look at me one, one, look at me.

And they may change their mind, right? Because I know my people, right? I know my people, right? Did they look at my shoes and look at me? And I don't look like that. I'm capable of doing that maybe, right? And so while I was there, I asked them, do you ever, do you ever. I every day with Franco and they give me description of this guy, you know, I said, good.

I be so, and the first thing that likes me [00:30:00] where I live, and I say, if I live in Harlem, Nope,

Jerome Haferd: they don't. They don't care. Yeah.

Franco Gaskin: No. Nothing good could come. Nothing good could come out of all that.

Jerome Haferd: That's right. That's right.

Franco Gaskin: So, so why? So what?

Jerome Haferd: You didn't tell them you lived in Harlem?

Franco Gaskin: No. Oh, no. I, I didn't tell them anything.

I just asked a question. They didn't know that I was the artist, I, I was, that I was the artist that do this painting. Because the manager wanted to introduce me and I let him know. But while he was there, us asking him for the garage, he says, do you ever. I think it was Harlem. I mean it is Franco.

Yes. By the name full him was Spanish name, you know? So they could never compare me with that name. See what I'm talking about? Yes. So that person, the paint on left. So when the, when left, the manager asked me why he didn't want me to be introduce us. Well, I explained to them and I said, okay, fine.

So my paintings used to be in all these places and they, people used to call me and ask me to come and remove my paintings because they break their window. Yeah. And they would go behind this country and take the paintings out. Yeah. And they come to the roof. Yeah. In the furniture store and take all the black paintings.

And so that's what, let that me to go downtown and go into the white places. Right. Not thinking that they will purchase by painting. Nothing. But, but in my tape you'll see that, that they talk about my painting. People, people waiting for weeks to get my painting. And then I went to Canada.

I was working in Canada Open that I lost to work for a month. I ended up six months in Canada. And so the stores was raised in house. Why you didn't tell me to leave? Because [00:32:00] people come back and take the deposit. People asking for Franco and Franco wasn't nowhere around. So that happened to me constantly.

Wherever I go to work for, for a month, six months.

Jerome Haferd: At that time, was there a focus of your paintings that you were showing in those galleries? Were they figurative? Were they?

Franco Gaskin: Oh yeah. All figures. But sex was the time. Sex was the theme of those days. Anything sex was sell. We go like that. Bam, I was good in.

Anthony Carrion: Just before you head on the different genres of your painting, also tell 'em that downtown you would say Franklin to Spanish speaking.

Franco Gaskin: Oh, oh, oh, oh, yes. To Oh, yes. That's another thing. Yeah. Then I started working in Spanish area now. And I never let them know that I speak Spanish. Because,

Jerome Haferd: and you went by Franklin.

Franco Gaskin: Franklin Uhhuh. See? Yes. Franklin. And so they would speak to me in English, and I understand, you know, of course. And then, uh, well, what was the point? I I never let them know that I understand because they were just talking things about that they would discriminate.

Jerome Haferd: Yeah.

Franco Gaskin: But, but no, not, not really, but they were.

He talk things and one of the girls would say, oh, he's much smarter than you guys, you know, but they could try to do things, you know? But anyway.

Jerome Haferd: And did it, did it, uh, affect you that you felt you had to hide that you were the artist of the paintings? Was that hard for you?

Franco Gaskin: Yes, because Thank you. The reason why, if I put Franco, they'll take advantage of the painting will say, oh, but you know that you are a country people, you are Latin guy, and [00:34:00] you know how we are.

And, and they get too close to me.

Jerome Haferd: Right?

Franco Gaskin: But by Franklin is strictly a different. It's a different,

Jerome Haferd: different race. Yeah. Different person at least than the name. Yeah. So

Franco Gaskin: they got angry me with more respect. Yeah. Not too familiar. Right? So that's why keep, keep your toe, keep it Franklin. Yeah. Yeah. Franklin.

Franklin. Okay. Now guess what happened? Now I come to Harlem, I couldn't use Franklin.

Jerome Haferd: They're like, what's Franklin?

Franco Gaskin: Franklin? If I use Franklin, they say another nigga.

Jerome Haferd: Uh huh. That's right.

Franco Gaskin: So I have to get Franco. Oh, he, he's not, he's not a negative. He's right. He's different. So I have to be using psychology back and forth.

Jerome Haferd: Absolutely. Yes.

Franco Gaskin: And you see what I'm talking about? So I had to use Franco.

Jerome Haferd: And so then, so this, this is, and then you can maybe ask about the specific dates. But, so before you get to the gates, how did this, so then the civil rights movement happened.

Franco Gaskin: The civil rights that was

Jerome Haferd: And how did that affect all of this for you?

Franco Gaskin: Well, that was somewhat good because coming back when I first came to the States, I saw his picture, Martin Luther King picture in the newspaper. And I was surprised that they put this black man picture so big because I figure why he must be something. For him to blow his, his face, but he almost got killed right at that time, right in, in the fifties.

And I, I, I didn't learn about him until I was there for a while. So what happened? Um, I was, after I started painting the gate, the same place that they almost got killed. It, it was a, it was a, a, what do you call, like a department store. [00:36:00] One lady taking a letter opening and almost stabbing to his heart.

And that was the smallest gate that I've ever painted. But the most meaningful gate. And there's a company in Washington. Keep calling me. Keep calling me for

Jerome Haferd: This is in Harlem you painted that gate?

Franco Gaskin: Yes.

Mikaila Meurer: This is your remember I have a dream gate?

Franco Gaskin: Yes, exactly. Exactly. And that was the most smallest thing I ever been, but the most meaningful gate.

And to see that, that, that. Spot that, that painted, that gate that way almost got killed. And so I always want to reserve that gate. So the company called me up and asked me, do I have anything new about Frank? Yes, this, it's very small. See that? Beautiful. See and see. Keep it fire burning. See?

That's what it means. Keep it dream called. But by away I, um, uh, I, I wanted to paint that particular picture because that's where he almost lost his life. Yes. See,

Jerome Haferd: do you remember where that was?

Franco Gaskin: Yes. The hundred 25th Street. It was on hundred 25th. Yes. And the name of the, of, of the department store name, um, bloom Steam at the time.

Bloom Steam.

Jerome Haferd: And that's when, and so, and, and then there's a number of paintings that deal with this. The civil rights and MLK and Black Power.

Franco Gaskin: This one deal with the civil rights thing. This one?

Jerome Haferd: Yes. Progress for my people. Born to be a King.

Franco Gaskin: Yeah.

Jerome Haferd: So is that when you think you started to think more politically about your paintings?

Franco Gaskin: I, I was never a person that liked to deal with political [00:38:00] things. Or even religion. But I had something to say and I'm glad I did. And I tried to express it

Jerome Haferd: And it was the spirit of the time this was, was happening.

Franco Gaskin: Yes.

Jerome Haferd: So what was it like back then on 125th Street during the Civil Rights movement?

What was it? How was it different than today?

Franco Gaskin: Well, you know, another state is same forever. Keep it changed. Um, attitudes change and things change, but there's always a little bit still there. You know, so, and there

Jerome Haferd: was, you know, Malcolm X was also around. Oh. Did you go to any of his speeches?

Franco Gaskin: Oh, listen, no. Malcolm X not, I never believe in Malcolm X because I'm so involved with the king. Ah-huh. And, and I was working in Canada. Right. And working in Canada. The, uh, professor that owned the, the place, he had a letter of books about Malcolm X and I began to read them. Oh my God. I couldn't put the book down.

Actually, this man is heavy. And from that time, Malcolm X was my man. Okay. And I, I saw, oh my God, Malcolm X, look what I'm missing. Yes. And I began to deal with Malcolm X.

Jerome Haferd: And did you ever see either of them in person?

Franco Gaskin: Yes. Malcolm X.

Jerome Haferd: Okay. Do you remember that speech or what, where that was

Franco Gaskin: No, no. He wasn't making speech. He was, he was just

Jerome Haferd: hanging out?

Franco Gaskin: He was hanging out where he used to live before he went to hundred 25th Street. He was still speaking to a couple people. They just hanging out, just talking. And I was listening to him to, you know, that simple conversation. Yeah. Nothing too heavy.

Jerome Haferd: And do you remember what he was talking about at the time?

Franco Gaskin: I think he was talking about the racial thing, you know, as usual [00:40:00] the environment with, with, with. White people are, are, and all what he was saying was so factual and wow, so real. And man, just listen. And there was the people just listen and boy, and happened that somebody took a picture of him talking to these people, you know?

Yeah. And so that was that. Then later on, he came to hundred 20 Street. Right. Started to open, uh, by Theresa Fashion, I mean there, Theresa Hotel. Yes, yes. But it, but his open al did that not affect me personally? It, it, it, um, let me put my, um, king, um, that I always think about him.

And I decided to paint, paint him in the sea. And,

Jerome Haferd: and then later you painted Obama as well? Yes. Obama, kind of that same lineage of people. Yeah.

Franco Gaskin: Yeah. Obama. Yeah. And then I, the first time I painted that scene with Malcolm X, um, King, and then I put, um, uh, what the white gang, what, what was the president, the name?

Jerome Haferd: Uh, Mandela? No, no, no, no. Mandela Obama?

Franco Gaskin: No.

Jerome Haferd: Uh,

Franco Gaskin: no. Oh my goodness. Um, a guy named, um, uh, no, no, no, no, no, no. Oh my God. That man is, um,

Jerome Haferd: president of the United States. Yeah. J-F-J-F-K?

Franco Gaskin: No. Uh,

Mikaila Meurer: now or back then?

Franco Gaskin: No, it's still alive. Hillary's husband

Mikaila Meurer: Clinton.

Jerome Haferd: Oh, bill Clinton.

Franco Gaskin: Bill Clinton. Yes. All up two pictures. One is Malcom X and, [00:42:00] and one is, is, uh, um, Martin Luther King. Martin Luther came and somebody always come and deface that picture.

Then I got the message And you

Jerome Haferd: deface, which, which one of them?

Franco Gaskin: Clinton.

Jerome Haferd: Okay.

Franco Gaskin: So I, I got the message, so I decided to change it and put Mandela. And from that time they leave it alone. And so when Mandela died, they called me up and I was out there. We were a K and all the TV people were shooting on me, you know, shooting.

Yeah. And I, I two cans in my hand. And that's the only piece of Mandela all over the place. So that was a good choice.

Jerome Haferd: Yeah. And really it's, it, it it's a black internationalism

Franco Gaskin: Yes.

Jerome Haferd: That you were sort of painting at that point.

Franco Gaskin: Yes.

Jerome Haferd: So do you want to ask about more about the gates?

Mikaila Meurer: Yeah. So your relationship with 125th Street was really important during that time because you did have so many gates on the street.

But what I was curious about was, you know, in recent years they've been disappearing with time. Um, and I'm just kind of curious how your relationship with 125th Street is today. Now that, you know, there's only two or three gates left.

Jerome Haferd: Maybe, maybe we start with, um, the, you know, your relationship with those store owners.

Franco Gaskin: Oh yeah.

Jerome Haferd: We're painting them and then we'll talk about the disappearance.

Franco Gaskin: Okay. Well, for the longest time I was painting this gate with no recompance but no money. That's my way of around the beauty of our Harlem. Yeah, and some of the owners don't care if it's painted or not because their business begins when the gate goes up. And mines when it come down.

Jerome Haferd: Yes. And you've, you've, you've, you've told me before this really amazing story about the process of painting these gates. So you would go

out early in the [00:44:00] morning. Oh. Can you talk about this? Like, what was the beginning of that?

Franco Gaskin: Oh, early in the morning and I, in my bed.

Jerome Haferd: And what gave you the idea to paint the gate.

Franco Gaskin: Okay. There was a gentleman by that. Oh, thank you for reminding me. He, he was the only black owner, um, of a store, I must say. And he asked me, Frank, I wanted you to paint somewhere in my gate. I never painted a gate before, but I wanted to try. And I did like a blossom tree.

And the blossom tree represent my philosophy, and I'm glad that they asked me because I was trying to paint something very simple, but, but very effective to me. And not knowing how to paint the gate. but I learned,

Jerome Haferd: yes, because the gate and if we've seen them, they have a very specific surface.

Franco Gaskin: Yeah. The convex and convex. It's the convex surface. Yeah. Yeah. And surface fixes. So I know that that was it, but I swear I don't go to mass this thing, I swear this cannot beat me. Yeah. I'm going to master you. I never stop until I did. So what happened? I started painting and then that one gate attract so many people.

Wow. How you do that? You know, and and my, it would glitter 'cause I used to put mirrors. When the light would went, when the car passed at night, the gate would illuminate itself. So I was always looking for effects.

Jerome Haferd: That's that magician training?

Franco Gaskin: Yes. Yes. A magician training.

Jerome Haferd: And this was on one 25th. Everything was on. Do you remember what year the first gate was?

Franco Gaskin: 81. Okay. No, no, no. 71. 79. 79. 79. Okay. Yes. So 81, then I started painting with wood [00:46:00] and all the rest of stores. And then get a lot of TV coverage.

Jerome Haferd: And Harlem was a, it was a rougher place then?

Franco Gaskin: Oh, yes. Oh yes. I, I, I won't say, I won't say it's rougher, just stuff there that the white community would, would, would warn the, uh, the, the, uh, the tourists not to come to Harlem.

That's right. Spend their money there. Right downtown. But knowing the human mind, they would want to come to Harlem to see the, see why, see something special. Yeah. Why is it that is so dangerous?

Jerome Haferd: Okay. Yeah. Yeah.

Franco Gaskin: I know that. So people say, but Frank, why you don't go downtown and paint? That's where the money is.

I said, no, Harlem needs me. And I stuck to Harlem and it's a good thing I stuck because I get a lot of caught from the Canadian. I mean, tend the dry people they want me to go to, to four or five. They call them ghetto cities.

Jerome Haferd: Ghetto cities.

Franco Gaskin: That's, that's what they call them.

Jerome Haferd: Wow. What were the other ghetto cities?

Franco Gaskin: Well, um, Los Angeles, pe uh, Pennsylvania. No.

Jerome Haferd: Philadelphia.

Franco Gaskin: Philadelphia. Uh, Chicago. Chicago. Two others. I said both more. I said, you just can't. Wow. I just can't go there and just start the paint. I got to go to the chambers of commerce and talk to them and Right. Get a good rapport with the, with the people there.

And I have a few kids that can like the paint to help me. And I want to charge them a million dollars, but if a trip, oh, that changed the complexion of things. So, so, because I got travel then.

Jerome Haferd: Yeah. Yeah. It's a huge investment.

Franco Gaskin: And I So many doors open up for, for from touch paint in one gate.

Jerome Haferd: Yes. Okay.

And then you started to paint [00:48:00] hundreds of them. So how did that kind of happen?

Franco Gaskin: And, uh, about, first I get a call from a millionaire. A white millionaire called me up and I says, um, where, where is your business so I can paint, you know, the gate? He said, no, I don't have a business. This is my home. I want you to paint four gates from my home.

So your home. You must have a, a head of the house. You know you were here at that point, right? Yeah, right here. You were already here? Yeah. So he says Paint four gates. And every Sunday he would call me and talk with me and says, I speak to my friends about you. And, and how did he learn about me? He, he was coming from Europe and in the plane, you know, there are magazines and he looked at it and he saw this American magazine give me a good spread.

And he wanted contact me right away. So what happened, man? He said, Frank, I want you to paint three of the gates for me. From my home and the other one,

and one of the gates, I want you to donate to the studio museum. Yeah. I said, oh, I don't think, I don't think I can talk to those people. He said, why? I said, well, I'd rather you talk to them about, about, yeah. So what happened was this, the New York Times wanted to do a piece of me, so they went there to ask them what they think about Franco.

Okay. So, oh, Franco. He says a old man that's in the street, that's to doing some painting, and so she put it exactly what [00:50:00] they say about me. Guess what happened now? I guess a month or six months, I don't remember, but the studio museum called me, sent me a letter, rather. I want me to give them a. A good reference to the, to the New York Time.

Right. See what I'm talking about now? Yes. Yeah. Yes. Okay. You see? I said okay, you can wait for that.

Jerome Haferd: And you weren't interested before all of a sudden

Franco Gaskin: I was an artist. I'm not an artist, I'm just old man.

Jerome Haferd: Right. They didn't, they didn't recognize the street artist as a real artist.

Franco Gaskin: That's right.

Jerome Haferd: Yeah.

Franco Gaskin: They didn't recognize.

Jerome Haferd: And was it, was this, was there really an idea of what a street artist is or you were really creating that I identity at the time?

Were there others doing this?

Franco Gaskin: No one was ever painting anything in Harlem because all was what was nothing. What was nothing. It was a lot of, uh, broken down houses and mm-hmm. And, and so forth. And

Jerome Haferd: so what were your influences? Because I, you know, I'm looking even at, um, at this paint, this painting that I, I have one of these at home. You gave me, yeah.

Uh, and you know, this is now probably the eighties

Franco Gaskin: maybe. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jerome Haferd: And here, you know, we're really starting to see kind of hip hop culture.

Franco Gaskin: Yeah.

Jerome Haferd: And so that when I started, started to influence you,

Franco Gaskin: I started to paint things that, that people could identify. Uhhuh, you know, and, you know, different paintings.

And this was the first and the only one I ever did. Mm. Yeah. And the guy with the big radio, you know? Right. Those are the things that used to be under. And anyway, I, um.

Jerome Haferd: And so as you painted, I mean you painted over a hundred of these gates.

Franco Gaskin: More than that. Maybe because some of them, maybe 200 of them more than them, [00:52:00] I forgot because I was going outta place.

I was going to Brooklyn, I was going to Queens and those, I didn't come.

Jerome Haferd: You were painting gates there also?

Franco Gaskin: Yes. Yes. Okay.

All, most of the gates is hundred 25th Street. And I wanted to establish one place so they can see that, that if I could do one. Area is a possibility that I could do. The same thing some places. And that's where the Canadian Canada drives, so that they wanted me to do that in other places.

Jerome Haferd: Yeah.

Franco Gaskin: See.

Jerome Haferd: and you, you were saying something before that's important, that at the time in particular, people from downtown white people were afraid to come to Harlem. Yes. But that started to change

Franco Gaskin: 'cause I changed.

Jerome Haferd: Yes. And what was that like? How were you so central to that?

Franco Gaskin: Okay, so what happened? The bus would come once in a while, the bus would pass by and the tour guy would call me into the bus. Frank come and say, say something to these people that they don't wanna come out the bus. They're scared.

Jerome Haferd: Right.

Franco Gaskin: And so I go in the bus and I, I used to hate that because it's.

I took in my time up to, and I say something and, okay, nice to meet you, boom. And then move on.

Jerome Haferd: Right, right.

Franco Gaskin: But one day, one day, it was a very gloomy day and a bus stop with a lot of French men and they, and, uh, tour guide took a chance to get them out the bus. At that time, I only had one table and this postcard, no pictures at all.

This postcard. And the, we came on and got up the face like. Like I say, what is this? You know, I say, oh my God. Oh my God. Anyway, they walked back into the [00:54:00] bus. What you would've done. I tell me, Mikaila.

Mikaila Meurer: oh, what have I done?

Franco Gaskin: What you have done that were you curse them out?

Mikaila Meurer: I would conivence him to stay, do some magic.

Franco Gaskin: and they came up their face like, so what is this?

Bring me on the bus to say this. I said, oh my goodness. What? What you would've done? Tell me.

Jerome Haferd: I think it would've been a blow to my ego. And I would've been discouraged, you know?

Franco Gaskin: Okay. At that time, as I told you, psychology and diploma, all these things was my, was my main thing because I, I had to deal with people.

Right. And I have to out to reach people. Yeah. I ought to let them understand, you know, where I'm coming from rather. I went into the bus and said, ladies and gentlemen, you don't have to buy anything. Please don't buy anything. Just come and take a picture with me. Uh, just so just take a picture with me.

I'll be so happy. Oh, nice guy. So they came out the bus. Yeah. Line up and take a picture with me and they clean the table up. Hey, they cleaned the, the table with I was selling two for five.

Jerome Haferd: Nice hustle. Uhhuh. It's a nice hustle. Yeah.

Franco Gaskin: No, but that, that's the truth because

Jerome Haferd: of course, yeah.

Franco Gaskin: They took up my time already.

So might as well have a memory of me. Yes. Yeah. So what I was trying to say, I, I was selling two postcards to \$5. Yeah. And I run all the postcards, so I was selling one for \$5 now because they wanted something. So thing changed. Yeah.

Jerome Haferd: You're just working all the time. You're making,

Franco Gaskin: but the So things change. The, they didn't think this postcard, it's anything. But my head changed.

Jerome Haferd: The psychology of it

Franco Gaskin: changed their mind. Yeah. And they'll have a [00:56:00] picture of me. That's what I was talking about.

Jerome Haferd: Right. They wanted you, they wanted to know you. And so that started to happen. Now a lot, you now have, you went to Japan, but then I developed, you became frank of the grave.

Franco Gaskin: I developed, uh, their personality. Yeah. That I know that would work with people. And now the ladies then would do some crazy things with me. Oh my God. At the time I was married to a Japanese lady and she used to cry. Oh, she used to cry because she couldn't believe that people, women would do these things.

They took off their skirt. Take it off their skirt completely. And let, let me sign my name on their busts and their butts.

Mikaila Meurer: I actually have a picture of that.

Franco Gaskin: Yeah.

Mikaila Meurer: Do you know that? I do. I have a picture of that

Franco Gaskin: Oh boy. Why that picture move me?

Jerome Haferd: The picture, you

Mikaila Meurer: know his picture.

Jerome Haferd: Yeah. And do you think part of that was this fascination with Harlem and black culture?

Franco Gaskin: The thing is

Mikaila Meurer: here you, you're signing her chest.

Franco Gaskin: Oh. Oh yeah. That's just one of them. But there's so many of them and they come and they didn't care what I do to, I turn 'em upside down. I said, these ladies.

Jerome Haferd: You're a celebrity.

Franco Gaskin: I could do anything. I could do Right on the face, right on the butt that I took off the jeans, pull the jeans down so I could start my name around the navel right into the back and look at my wife.

And, and she's, she, she turned her head that way because they couldn't believe and they, I could tell. So, so this man came up to me, this white man came up to me and he says, what is it that you have that all these women's always around you? I, I, I have the picture of that. I said, I, I'm showing him my, my work.

Jerome Haferd: Right.

Franco Gaskin: And they go crazy, you know? And they'll come [00:58:00] and they don't know me for nothing. They just come straight. This is frankly great. It's, it's in the book.

Mikaila Meurer: Yeah.

Franco Gaskin: Yeah. It's, oh my God. Even my mother sitting down beside me and the two white girls eating my face up and my mother looking at them. But so many things, even my, my, my daughter wouldn't put some of the pictures because she says he too risky, you know?

And they say 30 years from now they're going to sue you. 30 years from now, I won't be around, but, but, but she's warning me about these things.

Jerome Haferd: And this was always on 125th. Oh, and that really became your home base. You know,

Franco Gaskin: that's my own base.

Jerome Haferd: And so tell us about, tell, tell us about the difference of when you go out to paint in the morning.

What was that like when you would do that? How, what, what, what are the times of day that you were able to do it?

Franco Gaskin: In the morning, I get about four o'clock and I ask myself twice, why am I doing this? I'm not making enough money. Why am I crazy? But I didn't ask myself the third time. I just, something is pulling me like a magnet.

It's pulling me, just put on your boo boy, you know, put on your working clothes. As I hit the, the stairs, I feel the wind. Oh goodness. I'm so glad. I came outside and I gave the expiration to continue and I usually say prayer before and that keeps me going and usually say prayers every Sunday. And,

Jerome Haferd: and how would you do it?

You would then just go out. There's nobody on the street that time of day, nobody. You set up your paint and you just start doing, just stop

painting, and then you start open up until nine o'clock. Some of them will give me another half an hour to do a little bit more, and I, I'm so happy about that.

Jerome Haferd: [01:00:00] So and so then, um, and then, oh yes, so then McKayla, oh yeah, let's look at this one.

Mikaila Meurer: Yeah, I have some photos of you.

Franco Gaskin: Is some Italian? I'm speaking Italian. Then ask me why you speak Italian. Eh, sometimes. Why you speak French, right? Why you speak this one. What is business? People are my business and I try.

Jerome Haferd: So you learned to speak all those languages?

Franco Gaskin: Yes, I try. And use a couple of phrases

Jerome Haferd: And, and, and then Harlem became especially 125th.

Franco Gaskin: Oh yeah.

Jerome Haferd: Became a tourist mecca.

Franco Gaskin: They come especially to me, boom. Only to me. And if you look at the location you'll see the people.

Jerome Haferd: And this is the eighties, nineties,

Franco Gaskin: From a long, long before then

Jerome Haferd: Uhhuh. Okay.

Franco Gaskin: Long before I, I have old pictures. When they never used to come by the, by the hundreds, just like one bus at a time.

And nowadays like six buses would come. Three over and that, and three over here.

Jerome Haferd: Wow. Amazing. And you. And so when, and you were selling the postcard prints?

Franco Gaskin: I was selling postcard pictures, anything that, and I had to have some helpers.

Jerome Haferd: And did your relationship with, uh, the local, uh, with Studio Museum ever change?

Franco Gaskin: Oh, thank you for, remind me about that. So one day people, the public now will ask me, Franco, why you. That painting is not in the studio museum. I say, you gotta ask them, you know? And everyone would ask me the same question one day. Um, they called me up and tell me they gonna send a photographer.

To, to take my pictures. If, if I will be out there. I said, yes, and they did. And they have a booked, and they give me about three or four pages of my work.

Mikaila Meurer: Summer [01:02:00] 2005. Yes, I have it.

Franco Gaskin: Oh, yes. Yeah. Oh yeah. This is it. Yes. Yeah, this is it. Yeah. Yeah.

Jerome Haferd: And so, and, and you agreed to it.

Franco Gaskin: Of course, of course, of course, of course.

Jerome Haferd: So Mikaila, maybe now ask your, the question about today.

Mikaila Meurer: Yeah. Yeah. So today, so this was in 2005. Now, 20 years later, how do you feel your relationship with 125th Street has changed? Do you still feel the same way?

Franco Gaskin: Oh, yes. Oh yeah. It has changed.

Mikaila Meurer: Even though, you know, some of your gates are missing now?

Franco Gaskin: Yes, but I didn't expect things would stay forever. I understand. I like to see, um, new things came up.

Jerome Haferd: And when you walk down or, or now go out, even in the last couple decades, what do you think are the biggest differences in Harlem from when, maybe the seventies or the eighties to today?

Franco Gaskin: Well, they always wanted to change 125th Street.

Yeah. Into like a fifth Avenue. And I am aware of that. So it wasn't surprise me when they wanted to change the gender area, but I was so happy to see that the gate was there for over 40 years. Yes. And no one did the face my work. Until this,

Jerome Haferd: Until COVID, yeah.

Franco Gaskin: Came in and then the case was done for quite a while. So the graffiti artists though, what went crazy. And artists come from all over the world painting on and 125th Street now. And before it was not, never such thing.

Jerome Haferd: Right. So, so several of the remaining gates during that period got vandalized?

Franco Gaskin: Uh, yeah, I guess so. Yeah.

Jerome Haferd: And I, I guess you're, there's still other artists, but. Yeah. It was a, it was a unique moment.

Franco Gaskin: [01:04:00] Yeah. I, I was glad I was the pioneer of the gates and my main purpose was to have a street name Franco's Boulevard.

Jerome Haferd: Right. Yeah.

Franco Gaskin: I said, since I'm doing this for free, that's what my as what called the Street Franco's Boulevard. I planted a seed.

Jerome Haferd: Yes. And now it's for you guys and take you growing.

Franco Gaskin: Yes. And may become a reality. Yeah. But what really surprised me, I swear to God, when the school, your school, and your school did call me up and tell me that they want

Jerome Haferd: To work with you. Yeah.

Franco Gaskin: Work with me. When they showed me the, what they did. Oh my goodness. And the young mind. Yeah. Went into action and create something.

I never thought that was possible.

Jerome Haferd: Yes. What, what did, what was it like engaging with the students and Mikaila and those other students in here?

Franco Gaskin: That's what I was trying to mention. Mention to you. I, I, I was moved by the, by the different type of ideas that each of them had. And with very limited area to work with.

But, but yes, there it could be effective. And I was hoping that I lived to see it become a reality.

Jerome Haferd: Yes. Yeah. And that, you know, what I thought was really profound was you, you had an exchange with them about different technology And different, uh, methodology. And you shared how you used uh, different types of paint.

Franco Gaskin: Oh, yes.

Jerome Haferd: Uh, UV light.

Franco Gaskin: Yes.

Jerome Haferd: And then as architecture students mm-hmm. They're thinking about how do they design something new kinds of gates. Yes. That could still incorporate public art.

Franco Gaskin: Exactly. And maybe they work.

Jerome Haferd: What would be the. The leg living legacy, the living thing.

Franco Gaskin: Yeah.

And everything begins [01:06:00] from one man trying to do something and the young brains and young people took it and take it into another level. I wasn't able to do that. But the young people, that was very flattered to know that you all invited me to see the different ideas. I was really moved by it I swear.

Jerome Haferd: Oh, thank you. No, we so wow. We, it's so you're, it's so inspirational to hear your story that spans so many decades.

Franco Gaskin: Oh, yes, yes.

Jerome Haferd: In Harlem. What, in addition to the street sign, what would you, what is your dream for how your legacy would be remembered, maybe in physical space in Harlem?

Franco Gaskin: Well, the only thing I ever thought of is to have the.

If, oh, at one time they wanted to make a statue of me. Right where I started. And I used to paint it like this, you know. But then they changed it to, um. Adam Clayton Powell probably because he, he was much more popular than I am.

Jerome Haferd: Right, right. Okay. But maybe, maybe someday.

Franco Gaskin: Someday.

Jerome Haferd: And you had, you had found an article about the East River.

Mikaila Meurer: Yes.

Jerome Haferd: Did you That one time, okay, tell us about this, and then we'll, we'll finish up.

Franco Gaskin: I think he know more about that one. What, the East River time? Yeah. State Gates Park. Yes. Yeah.

Mikaila Meurer: So this, this was something that came up in the archive. Oh yes. This plan to put your gates near the African burial ground.

Franco Gaskin: Yes. Uhhuh

Mikaila Meurer: Along 125th street for in between first and second.

Franco Gaskin: Yes.

Mikaila Meurer: And, um, you know, there, there was, there was that, but then there was also this news article that got published How Save the Gates of Harlem celebrated you, um, and your legacy at the East River Plaza. [01:08:00] And I'm just, I'm curious how they reached out to you to preserve your work.

Franco Gaskin: Oh, there was a big offer. They wanted to purchase the gate and replace it with, with a simple gate. And they, they had a big, big ideas. Money, money wise.

Jerome Haferd: And was this the parks department or, or the city?

Franco Gaskin: No.

Jerome Haferd: What? What was it?

Mikaila Meurer: Save the gates of Harlem. Yeah. Okay.

Jerome Haferd: So it's an organization?

Franco Gaskin: Yeah. Yeah.

Jerome Haferd: Wow. Okay.

And they were Bloomfield Development Corporation.

Jerome Haferd: Oh, Bloomfield Development.

Franco Gaskin: Okay. Yeah. And they wanted to invest. Some money

Jerome Haferd: And sort of re, re reframe them on that part of 125th?

Franco Gaskin: Well, no, I, I don't know what they was going to do with them, but they wanted to purchase the gate before it become obsolete or whatever.

And then place it with some other simple gate, you know. And, but they wanted to pay the owner. Only for it.

Jerome Haferd: Okay. You know? And what did you think of that plan? Is that something you would want to see happen somehow?

Franco Gaskin: Sure. I mean, and anyone that can take my work and take it to another level.

Jerome Haferd: It's fine by you,

Franco Gaskin: It's fine by me because things that I couldn't do personally. And if you have the ability and the means and the way to do things and involve me, why not? Because, because I, I, I always says, you know, you guys, you guys are, are the greatest. Not me. Why? Ask me why.

Jerome Haferd: Why?

Franco Gaskin: Uh, because what you are doing, I couldn't do it.

I, I make the first step. And you took it and took it into another step, [01:10:00] into another lever. Right? It's just like a reporter, you know? Yeah. I may be nobody. And he discovered me and he could make the story. That the world would know because he has the way to do it. And so he's the greatest.

Jerome Haferd: That's what I say. It's a, it's a, it's a generous greatness that you have. Harlem's Picasso.

Franco Gaskin: Well, that's what they called me the first time, and I always tell them, I am not Harlem's Picasso because you, you wouldn't call Picasso Remembrant.

Jerome Haferd: That's right.

Franco Gaskin: Why you call me Picasso?

Jerome Haferd: That's right.

Franco Gaskin: But after a while, I just give up.

I say, if you think I stood under the shadow of Picasso's. Okay. You know?

Jerome Haferd: And do you think this, do you think your career could have happened in a different place, or is it very linked to Harlem and the specificity of this place?

Franco Gaskin: I, I cannot predict the future. And it's one thing I cannot do, and no one can.

So I did it little bit. One thing, two things in mind. If something come of it, good. If nothing come of it, still good because nobody tell me to paint it, you know, continue. So it is my drawings so I can continue, but. It opened up so many jewelers that I was shocked that invited to so many countries. So many countries and so many.

Jerome Haferd: Well, if there's, what's one piece of advice that you could give to a student, a young designer in today's world, what would it be? So what, what's one piece of advice you would give to the [01:12:00] next generation? Um, trying to think about design and place.

Franco Gaskin: Well, you all have a good start and the school is backing you up with, with letter. And, and that's the good stuff. But I want you to understand that, that there will be times when, uh, things not working right? But you have to have faith in, in what you're doing and believe in yourself because it happened to me many times.

But I know that, that everything don't have to work the way you think it should work. But if you. People watch you and people study you and they see that you are, that you are sincere and they watch you. And that's what comes, because if you, they study you too slick. You know, people watch you and them speaking about that because all these women come around me and, and, and if I make one mistake to do something funny.

Yeah, they're the one who's gonna spread the word. Right. You know, don't go there. And he's a dead old man or whatever. So I keep my hand in my pocket

sometime, but it's hard to, right. It's hard to get my hand in my pocket, you know? Yeah. Very hard.

Jerome Haferd: What, can you give us one anecdote of what was, what's a, what's a really. Into it. Maybe your favorite memory of one of the stores that you did the gate. Something you discovered

you can talk to. Uh oh.

<Brief pause for phone call>

Alright. Maybe just a couple memories or interesting stories.

Franco Gaskin: Oh, I'm glad you asked me about that. Yeah. There are one, two, or three gates [01:16:00] that. Means a lot to me. A lot. The first one was the think positive. Mm-hmm. I can tell the story behind that one.

And that one was, um, the, the, the A blossom tree. And the other one was, uh. Um, progress on liberty for my people. And one more was the one with the harmony among the races. Harmony among the race.

Jerome Haferd: Can you tell us about that one?

Franco Gaskin: Harmony among the races at the time. To the race of tension.

It was very, you know, the black and white stuff. And I

Jerome Haferd: Do you remember what year that was?

Franco Gaskin: No, I don't, I, I have bad memory about the years.

Jerome Haferd: Maybe the seventies. Yes, it could be.

Franco Gaskin: No. Could be in the eighties. Could be in the eighties because in the seventies I was painting velvet. Okay. In the seventies I was painting velvet, those like crazy.

Jerome Haferd: And why did you choose to paint that?

Franco Gaskin: I choose to paint what?

Jerome Haferd: The harmony among the races.

Franco Gaskin: As I mentioned, that was something that we. We got to talk about sometime we got right. We gotta face it sometime, you know?

Jerome Haferd: Yeah. And, and did you feel like when you were meeting the different store owners, you were learning more about Harlem when you were getting to know them and the different plate types of establishment that they ran?

Franco Gaskin: No. They left everything to me because this wasn't their project. This was my project.

Jerome Haferd: Yeah. And was it all black owners or

Franco Gaskin: No.

Jerome Haferd: Was every

Franco Gaskin: Only one black owner.

Jerome Haferd: Really?

Franco Gaskin: Only one.

Jerome Haferd: Okay. What were, what was the race of the different store owners on 125th?

Franco Gaskin: It was all Jewish.

Jerome Haferd: Really at the time.

Franco Gaskin: All Jewish. All Jewish.

Jerome Haferd: That's definitely different from today.

Franco Gaskin: And then it changed into Arabs. I see. Arabs change can, [01:18:00] um. Korean. You know, it changes, you know, every 10 years. I see. It changes.

Jerome Haferd: Right. So, but Harlem by the eighties was quite black, right? Yeah. And but they weren't the, they weren't the store owners.

Franco Gaskin: Well, they was just a front. It was just a front, but it was owned by White. But there was a thing that the black actually rebelled that they wanted to be the owners. Be established themselves in Harlem. So the government give them that. Yeah, privilege, but it was always the white men behind, right?

Jerome Haferd: Yeah. Yeah. It's definitely still there is some of that, but that has changed. Now you have more black owned establishments here in Harlem.

Franco Gaskin: Oh really? Which one? I can remember some of the,

Jerome Haferd: There's now, you know, there's some pretty famous restaurants now that are black owned, like, uh. Uh, Melba or Red Rooster, uh, over near, you know, uh, Lennox Ave and '25th.

Franco Gaskin: Uh, I've been been on site for quite a while,

Jerome Haferd: But now one 25th has a lot of chain stores. Yeah. As you've seen. So that's a big change from the small businesses to these big chains like, uh, target or, um, trader Joe's or Whole Foods. Yeah, it's a different environment.

Franco Gaskin: They take up, they lead up a three or four small store to make it one big one.

Jerome Haferd: Right. Exactly. So that's a big, that has changed the fabric of the street and how you experience it. Yeah. I think from when you were doing the gates.

Franco Gaskin: Oh yes. Oh yes. So now that I'm not painting anymore, I figure well, everything happened for a purpose. Yeah. A reason.

Jerome Haferd: And, and it was a specific time, uh, that it's changed, but we were gonna think about how to [01:20:00] continue that legacy.

Franco Gaskin: Oh, I'd be so

Jerome Haferd: With the new urban environment.

Franco Gaskin: I'd be so happy to see that that happen because as I mentioned before, I used to go, uh, I used to make a. Yeah, I like, uh, like a fluorescent sign, but I, I put it on the street sign Franco's Boulevard.

Jerome Haferd: Right, right. Well, may it come to pass. Yes. Thank you so much, Franco.

Franco Gaskin: Excuse my hand.

Jerome Haferd: Yeah, Franco the Great. And Mikaila. Thank you Mikaila, my co-interviewer.

Mikaila Meurer: Yes, thank you.

Jerome Haferd: Good. And uh, that's, that's all for today. Thank you so much. Alright, perfect. That was fantastic. Sorry we went a little longer than I thought. Oh, well I just thought that was really, really great. Well, was good and I hope you thought it was good.

Franco Gaskin: Well, I was trying to look the best way. You look great. You look great. You look very sharp, sharper. Yeah. Be careful I can't cut you. Oh, please. Oh, please check me please. The piece got me.

Franco Gaskin: Oh, yes. I wanna take a picture of you. I, okay, great. Your phone, can you send it to me? Yes. But you on inside, right? Yeah. Alright, come on. Let me see. So you can see my eyes? Yeah. Okay, good. Okay. Ready? 1, 2, 3, and one more. 1, 2, 3. There we go. Alright, thank you. I want to get one with, with you, Anthony and Franco.

Jerome Haferd: Yeah, definitely. Oh, do you want me? Yeah, the three of you's good. Yeah, course. Alright. 1, 2, 3, and one more. 1, [01:22:00] 2, 3. Okay. Wow, you got a, you got some great people around you, sir.

Franco Gaskin: Oh yes, I can see that. Thank you.

Jerome Haferd: And you're still sharp as a tack. I love it. Yeah, that was wonderful. Thank you so much for doing that with us.

Mikaila Meurer: Yeah, thank you.