

# Art as context.. THE CONTEXT AS ART



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Franc Palaia has managed to find motivation for his art in the world around him. Found objects. Photos of people and buildings and landscapes. Apples. Street art. The mundane, the profound, and the fanciful.

Franc Palaia is an artist in full, and a career that has spanned over 45 years has resonated with beauty, challenge, whimsy, imagination and celebration.

## It began with an apple

The apple appeared early in his career – in fact, it was the subject of a kindergarten drawing exercise. His rendering of form, light and shadow so impressed his teacher that she singled him out. With a moment as simple as a teacher providing positive feedback to a young pupil, the seed (if you'll excuse the play on words) was planted.

Child of Italian immigrants – a tailor and a dressmaker – Franc Palaia grew up near the New Jersey shore. Encouraged through his grade school and high school years to be serious about his art, he attended Keane University (at the time it was known

as Newark State College) and with a Bachelor's degree in hand, he took advantage of the scholarships, fellowships, and stipends as a teaching assistant to get his Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Cincinnati.

## A job that changed everything

Back in New Jersey, Frank pursued a career trajectory that was designed to allow him to also pursue his art. There were jobs in the post office, as a carpenter's helper, and in sales. None of those pursuits had any semblance of being a career. Those were jobs one took to survive while trying to solidify a direction and survive while in the process.

Frank was an artist, and one pursuit would influence his art for the rest of his career. "I got a job as a sign painter – something I ended up doing for years. I was painting letters on buildings, but I was also painting logos and pictures," he comments. "From sign painting to mural painting is not a big step if you have the artistic training, the vision, and the passion."

## The artist's imaginative mind

Piece by piece, bit by bit, he sold his work at art fairs and craft shows.

An exploration of his website ([www.FrancPalaia.com](http://www.FrancPalaia.com)) reveals unique and, at times, quirky pieces that have emanated from the imaginative mind of the artist. Stacked suitcases with backlit photos taken on world travels ... Puglia Olive Oil cans turned into lamps ... an inverted mailbox with a backlit photograph ... fancifully decorated bus shelters and colorful representations of Palaia's public art.

He developed techniques that were somewhat unique and explored the wider ranges of the art world. "I started making fake frescos, constructing walls of Styrofoam sheets four by eight feet, breaking them and adding elements," he recalls. "The effects were a total illusion, and they gained some interesting attention."

The attention was so focused that Franc ended up with a startling prize. He spent a year studying in Italy with all of his expenses paid. Proud of his Italian heritage, Franc was able to explore the country of his parents' birth and to feel the spark of imagination that travel can bring to an artist eager to assimilate what each unique place **had to show ... had to offer.**

Years later, Franc Palaia has taken his drawing, painting, and photographic skills to 25 countries and



Above, top to bottom: *Dos Hermanos*. The artist, Franc Palaia (right), with fellow artist Gaia (left).



found one subject that blends, seamlessly, into his own artistic expression. The Great Wall of China, the Berlin Wall, the buildings of Jersey City, Philadelphia, Havana, New York and north into the Hudson Valley. The use of walls as the foundation of art have captivated Franc.

### One of the largest installation of public art in the US

The year was 1995, and Franc Palaia was a fully engaged muralist. His massive Columbus Drive project in Jersey City (he project managed and painted a mural that was 350 feet by 60 feet) was one of the largest installations of public art in the United States at the time. "Murals can be transient art," reflects Palaia. "I met an internationally commissioned public artist, Gaia, when he was working on a project in the Hudson Valley. As we talked, he became excited about his next project – a huge wall in Jersey City. He had been commissioned to paint over the mural I had painted in 1997. The mural spanned 12 buildings and lasted for over 20 years. It was time to be refreshed."

### Photography and travels

His travels and his fascination with

the range of creativity found in public art inspired Franc to refine and rely on his photographic skills. Not only would he be able to capture images that he would see only in transit, he would be able to study them, take inspiration from the work of predecessor artists and share those images with an eager audience back home. His panoramic photographs of expanses of bridges and aqueducts, his multimedia pieces that incorporate his painting skills with imaginative photography are separate pieces of mosaic that is the unified portfolio that is Franc Palaia's work.

One such display runs until June 30th, 2018, at the Cunneen Hackett Art Center in Poughkeepsie, NY. *Cuban Murals and Street Art* consolidates his work amassed during two trips to Cuba (in both 2013 and 2018) and presents not only photographs but mixed media photo works created by Franc. The exhibition will be open to the public during Poughkeepsie's Open Studios weekend June 16th and 17th.

Palaia's focus on the public art in Cuba is worthy of its own volume. Traveling to places both in the cities and out in the countryside, he has seen and photographically captured a side of the reclusive island nation not often seen. From photographic murals on crumbling buildings in Havana to the massive "Dos Hermanos" hillside painting in Vinales, Pino Del Rio, he has captured the colorful soul of the Cuban people.

### Community Portraits

Because Franc Palaia is a prolific artist, his work has been presented in many forms. Public murals can be seen in person, they can be preserved and shared as individual photographs, they can be curated into multi-media shows and consolidated into books. Art can be captured and emblazoned on clothing, incorporated into found objects to make interesting lamps, furniture and objects d'art that are collected as sculpture.

A most recent creation of public art has been the "Community Portraits" project in Poughkeepsie. The 20 portraits of local citizens in poses of



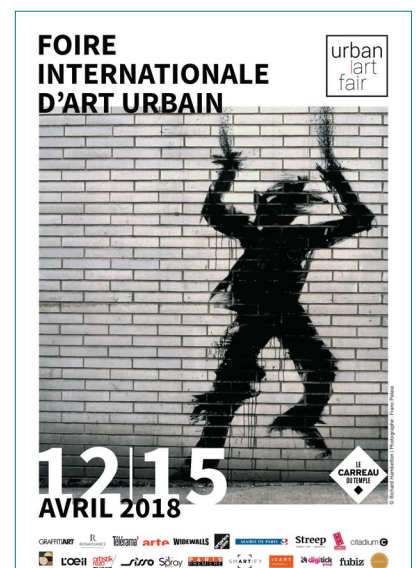
friendship and open communication reflect Palaia's desired effect. "I wanted to counterbalance racism in this country through art." By taking photographs of friends throughout the area and incorporating them into heroic images, he has made a clear and affirmative statement.

Widely known and respected in Europe, one of Franc's images was selected to be the cover photograph for the catalogue of an urban art fair held in Paris in April of this year (see cover image to the right). With a reach and influence that goes well beyond his native New Jersey or his chosen home in the Hudson Valley, Palaia has made a concerted effort to evoke thought, even change as well as aesthetic appreciation for the compelling, sometimes overwhelming presentation of public art. "Murals are a catalyst that ignites the public to notice their surroundings," affirms Franc Palaia.

Now that the weather has turned warm, empty walls of abandoned buildings are being bathed by the sun – a proper preparation of the public muralist's "canvas." Look carefully. There may be artists working. Art is context ... and the context is art. •

See more of Franc Palaia's art portfolio at [www.FrancPalaia.com](http://www.FrancPalaia.com). "Cuban Murals and Street Art" runs through June 30, 2018 at the Cunneen Hackett Art Center – Theater Galleries 12 Vassar Street in Poughkeepsie, NY. For more information call (845) 486-4571.

Are you an artist and interested in being featured in Main Street Magazine? Send a brief bio, artist's statement, and a link to your work to [arts@mainstreetmag.com](mailto:arts@mainstreetmag.com).



Above, top to bottom: Detail of Palaia's mural on Columbus Drive. Palaia's cover photo for the urban art fair in Paris, France.

