

Edra, I'm so excited to talk to you today. Thank you so much for your time and for meeting with me. And uhm I know you've been traveling and you just arrived in New York. And uhm so I'm just very, very excited. I first became exposed to your work as a museum educator at the Whitney Museum. And I've been talking about your work and interacting with it. And I just love it. And so I'm so excited to be able to talk with you today (laughs). I'll actually be talking on Sunday about in Spanish and in English. So this is really helpful. - We can definitely do the Spanglish. (all laughing) - That's definitely what I do. My Spanish is definitely Spanglish (laughs). But at least if people can understand me, that's all that counts. So you are, in my opinion, a serious researcher. Tell me about your graduate studies at the Art Institute of Chicago. What was the focus of your research? Where did you do it and why? Well, first, thank you, Jacqueline, for having me in your program. I'm so excited to engage in conversation with you. Well, when I attended the School of the Art Institute, I realized soon enough that uh perhaps I didn't have the education or the preparation to navigate things easily. I come from Puerto Rico. I did all my education at a Catholic elementary and high school. And then I went to, or I attended a school of the artist plastic as the Puerto Rico. That is a school of design of Puerto Rico in Old San Juan. That is the only school that provides a and BFA degree. And uh it was very much studio based. And I had history courses. I think during that time I realized that I was interested in in content and how to expand on narratives through content. And I have memories about having a professor, giving an assignment, and maybe me being the only one that brought the assignment that required writing (laughs) for a xylography class. And I kept thinking, I have always been interested in writing and creative writing. I joined a poetry course and I don't think I was very good uh (laughs). Many things that I started making that school that I think I got indication that I was not good at it and that uh I didn't really had a great foundation but I always felt very much creative and in need of an outlet. And so, well, years past, I go to the Art Institute and this experience is telling me I'm not going to make the cut here if I don't apply myself or look for help because I really didn't have a great foundation to to start with, you know, and to expand on a conceptual work the way that I wanted to. So I think very, being very honest and admitting to myself, you know, I'm not a scholar. And this is not the level that I, that I am, but I love education. I became a teacher and I taught high school for inner city kids. I did, I taught high school for 10 years. And that was a great experience. I taught just basic art courses (laughs). And was that in Chicago that you were teaching high school? Yes, at the Chicago public schools for three years and six years for the Chicago Charter schools. And that was while you were studying at the Art Institute or that was before? That was Soon after that was my first job was teaching for a program called After School Matters that provide jobs for young artists and place them in high schools. And that was my first teaching experience. And I really loved it. I love working with high school kids. I was a very shy person. And I think I require too hard to express myself. And that's that's exactly why I'm an artist because I needed a voice and I couldn't do that for myself. I was extremely shy. I grew up in a sheltered kind of environment that didn't really support (laughs) that as well. You said that you were shy. So do you think that, or are you suggesting that teach your experience as a teacher, high school teacher, helped you to overcome that shyness? Yeah, I think at that point in my life, I overcome some of the the fear. I didn't have the confidence to teach at the university level. That happened years after at the School of the Art Institute. I also taught at UIC. And those were great experiences as well. I

think I spent seven years teaching to undergrads and then advising grad students that has been the best time in the later part of my teaching career. You know, I also was a teacher and I also sort of identified myself before as shy. I taught uh sixth grade science and I tell people that I feel because like as a teacher, doing public speaking every single day. And when you're teaching like young people, that (laughs) is really complicated and exciting. And they will really like grow you up as a speaker. And I really do feel like that teaching helped to eradicate my fear of public speaking. So I'm really interested that you said that. But I kind of want to rewind for a second. So you're in Puerto Rico, you're studying at the Catholic school and the art school in Otsanwan. So what brought you to Chicago, then? How did that happen? The School of the Art Institute, I became a commercial painter in Puerto Rico and that led me to be in this commercial gallery for a while that through that gallery I found great success as a commercial painter. But I didn't really know (laughs) much about the art world about the commercial art world or the art world. It just, my life has nothing to do with that world. And the uh kinds of paintings that I made were perhaps somewhat naive and what they really allowed me to express myself. So I think maybe they're the part of it that was authentic. It was appreciated. And then the galleries felt like that they have this cultural value that that made them, you know, a part of the beginning of my career. But these these galleries, her name is Mauda Kela. And today she's uh 86 years old. Oh wow! And I got to reconnect with her. And she became my friend. I love her very much. I think she's uh a luminary, you know, like a very knowledgeable woman from Haiti that migrated to Puerto Rico and made an incredible career there as a as a dealer. And she was uh the dealer of some very important artists in Puerto Rico, like Arnaldo Roche, which at the time she was representing him and I mentioned this because when I was a part of the gallery she told me if you are going to do your MFA you should go to the school of the art institute. I mean I think she recommended it mainly because Arnaldo Roche went to the school and he found great success and acceptance there. And so that that was very much what influenced my decision of coming to Chicago, going to Chicago and doing my my master's. And was that the only school that you applied to? Uh I think so (laughs). That's amazing. And you're still in Chicago. So you must love Chicago now. I love Chicago for many, many things. We have great cultural activity and it's also easy to navigate, to get around. Yeah, because they have the train, they have buses and I have a car, but I have some limitations so I cannot drive, you know, on the highway or some places. And do you escape the cold weather in the winter? How do you do it? (laughs) Well, I travel many, many times to Puerto Rico because I still have my mother and my brother there. And that really pulled me. I've been in a back and forth for a very long time. And now more, but uh I've been, I'm in hold because I have a lot of work right now with my art career. And so I'm looking forward to visiting probably like in mid-May or June (laughs) you know. - Okay, so back to you as a researcher. So, yeah, so I want to to learn more about your graduate studies research that you did, 'cause I looked that up and I thought it was so interesting. - Well, I actually think it was not during my graduate years, but it was after, because the project graph, I've been pursuing this project for over a decade now, but it happened a bit after grad school. I've been, I've been out of school over 20 years. (laughing) So I think that what I did in grad school, I started to make work outside of my my concentration that was painting. And I think I became very much a multidisciplinary artist. I created my own project space. So the research really comes after grad school. I figured how to integrate the research aspect in my work without disrupting the visual

art experience. So it was great. I don't know. It just had really, I think I had really clear goals of what I wanted to do. I thought after graduating from SAIC, I thought there's no room for, you know, making naive work or work that is not informed. I want really progress so I have to apply myself but I also felt very compelled to learning because the subject that I was interested in. So the research that really takes place for the project graph is trying to learn and understand about the decorative concrete fences and the karate motifs and the raw item fence motifs that live in Puerto Rico in the lower and middle class communities hmmm. That is the beginning of my research (laughs) And so the piece graphed that's at the Whitney Now in the show No Existe Un Mundo Pusurican is that one of the first pieces that you were working on in that, is that a series or this idea of graft, like uh is it a series of works? Can you elaborate a little bit on that? Yeah, so graft is an architectural intervention and as such I have to consider the space where it's going to live. The iteration of graft that is at the Whitney Museum, I'm not sure what number it is, but it might be like 13, 14. I've been working on graph for 10 years, over 10 years now. But this is the first iteration that I make of graft that is made creating a representation of uh the decorative concrete motif. So I never have done the decorative concrete motif. And this is the first time I have the access to the technology that allow me to to craft, you know, the concrete block to make it look like a concrete block or at least the motif in a more three-dimensional form. So you're creating those or are some of them also found objects that you're working with as well? No, no, they are sources that come from Puerto Rico and the project is titled "Graft" because it's a symbolic type of transplant. I am grafting something from Puerto Rico and placing it in anywhere in the United States. And I I think about it as a way of inhabiting a space. - And what role does color play? 'Cause I noticed that there was different, the one that's at the Whitney is red, and I've seen white, I've seen black. I think, can you talk about the role of color in the graph series? - Yeah, well, everything that is made through the project graph have a source. So the original source of that particular piece that is at the Whitney, the original one is in color red. But there's other, this is uh decorative concrete block that is very common in Puerto Rico, but it's not very commonly made commercially produced. It's not commonly produced commercially. So I became more interested in this particular decorative motif because it's very strange. I don't find it particularly beautiful, but uh but it's it's intriguing and you have this, it's very, I don't know, I find that kind of unforgettable. You have this characteristic, it kind of look like a flower, but it also can look like a graphic of, it could be like, I don't know, some people have compared it, Like, is it a graphic coming from like the hurricane? And I'm like, no, no (laughs), it's a decorative concrete block. But I'm glad that people have all kinds of reading. - Yes, people have asked me the decorative nature of the the piece graph that's at the Whitney. They've asked me about, are there African influences in the design of the piece? And so I was wondering if you could comment on that. Yes, so through the research that I , that I did that motivated me to continue to do the project graph, I found a monograph by a Puerto Rican architect and his name is Jorge Ortiz Colom. And he wrote about the African influence in the design build of Puerto Rico. And uh this, you know, in his research, he advocate for this African influence, which is something that is not part of the populist knowledge of Puerto Rico. And as a high school teacher, I kept thinking, or ex-high school teacher mmm-hmm, I kept thinking about how fascinating it is when you find things that in this case, I thought this should be a part of the common knowledge. These are the houses of the lower and middle class homes. And these particular elements are have been

appropriated for centuries. So, you know, it was a motivation to start the project. And as I say, I'm so intrigued about information. I'm interested in learning. So I thought I really cannot do this project by myself because uh because I thought it was too important to kind of limited to my, only my own views about it. So I decided to invite other architects, historians, Even other artists, poets, I have a great archive that I've been building throughout the years of contributions, literary contributions and art contributions that are a part of the archive of graft that not only speak about that African influence, but in general about about the experience of the project and what the project is intending. - One of the things I love about it is that it really invites the viewer to, like they have to work in order to engage the piece. Like they have to move their body. There's like this embodied nature. And it's interesting 'cause that piece at the Whitney is up against the wall. But, you know, when I think about how I read about how you talk about the, how architecture is mediating social relations, I think, you know, it's interesting. It would be also, I would love to experience the work, not against the wall, where we could like go on other sides. And I've seen pictures, I know that it's often displayed that way as well. So yeah, I've just been in there's counted people having actually emotional reactions as well. There's a woman who was from Puerto Rico. And she, she was like, Oh, you know, those things, you know, I have, you know, like, she was like, I have a hard time, you know, to to look at those, you know, like, because I think it was bringing a lot of memories back for her. And I was like, wow, this, tell me more about that. So it's been a true pleasure to continue to interact with that piece (laughs). It's so nostalgic for so many people. I get a lot of anecdotes from, you know, from viewers, people that I don't know that will share a picture, will write to me and tell me about it. It's been so uh powerful and satisfying also to do this project. I've seen images of Rihasta in museums and homes and outdoors as public art. Do you have a preference for where these works belong or speak most profoundly? Yeah, well, each place kind of gives me something. So the thing about graph that I enjoy the most is that it's almost like crafting a gift for somebody. And in the case of the experience of how to make graph, I have to go to the site and really try to absorb every part of the site, the architecture, the history around it, the light, the colors, everything, you know, that could possibly give me an indication of what would be the best way to respond to it. So I see graphs as a series of responses to the site. But I don't know if I have a favorite. I had, you know, I have made some graph iteration that are I've been amazing to see them like one that was a temporary commission at the Chicago Botanic Gardens. And this was a representation of a of a house that was inspired by one of these concrete homes that live in Puerto Rico. This representation was fenced with a particular decorative pattern that also I source like everything else I source from these neighborhoods in Puerto Rico. And then that iteration live on a lagoon. So the the site imagine this absolutely breathtaking lagoon in a botanic garden and your work is going to be floating there (laughs) Four months. Wow. So that was amazing to be able to choose that site and then to craft something for that site. It's a bit challenging because I mean, I have to use my imagination really to address this because the structure was not going to be close to the public. It was going to, you know, I think it was 30 or 40 feet away from, from viewer. So you can see it through the distance. And the original design didn't have a color, it was white. And I was not 100% happy with that. Because uh it was just uh a solution that I felt like I had to settle with, till I found the right solution. And as I am visiting and revisiting this site at the Botanic Gardens, I realized I started absorbing the color from this place. And I put in my mind, I put a

palette, a palette of colors together. And it was tones of blues and tones of green and brick, concrete colors and the palette itself, I decided that I was going to use these colors to paint the surface of graft and I never have painted the surface in an organic manner hmm. So before the work at the Whitney Museum, this is the first, you know, iteration of graft that I paint in a very loose form on top of these structures and decorative patterns. So it was a pretty large a pretty large sculpture. It was over 50 feet wide. Oh wow. Like 14 feet tall. And uhm I got the colors that I selected. They were like four colors. And I diluted them. They were house paint that I diluted with water and I got some rollers and painted and painted with others as well. I had friends helping me paint this very large, like a lattice walls in this very organic way. So there was the element of chance and how that was going to look like from a distance. So there were a lot of series of of chances that I had to take, you know, to make it happen. I didn't really, I couldn't really imagine. There was not also like a chance for trying it out (laughs). I love that you have people helping you, like collaborating with you. That sounds like a wonderful experience, like a paint party with Edra Sokoma. It was a paint party (laughs). I was like imagining it. I haven't done many paint parties. That's a very rare yeah moment in my life. And my in-laws were there painting with me (laughs). - Oh, wow. That's amazing. I would love to see photos of that. - Yeah, yeah. I think there's some pictures on their website on the Chicago Botanic Garden website. - Okay, awesome. Great. yeah So reflect on your schooling experiences throughout your life from childhood through graduate school. Do any of these experiences stand out in particular as influential to your journey in becoming an artist or your practice as an artist? I'm thinking about just kind of sort of, and you alluded to this a little bit earlier, but just how did Edrosoto arrive at being an artist? - Yeah, I think I attribute my formation to my years in Puerto Rico. And when I was in high school, I think that's whenthings uhm I became more comfortable expressing myself through art uhm. During my uhm upbringing in Puerto Rico at my home, there was a lot of crafting. Like uhm my parents, they used to have a commercial ceramic business. In the house, they will make ceramics at home. They will make molds. And everything was like, imagine commercial ceramics are like pre-made molds that are casted with slip and, you know, they're like figurines and things that are just commercially available. And then they casted other things themselves and then they will make handmade objects and things like that. There was a lot of casting. They love casting and like putting them on the kiln and I love the experience of making you know crafty things. I made this, I remember making these pendants that I will put little, little rocks and the rocks were like a type of glaze that when you put it in the kiln and you take it out, you will know the color, you will know the color when they come out of the kiln. So I loved that I was really, that was really fun. That was really fun to do that. And then I will sell them like necklaces with this little (laughs) pendants that I made. My mother was also, she had her cake business at home, but they were not like uh just birthday cakes, you know, she will make installations of wedding cakes and quinceañera cakes. It will be a production of like this meter with sugar lakes and bridges and skirts and sugar flowers and it was just amazing, you know, and I think that probably it was some in my desire to like make art. But in high school, I ended up having an art club and eh I was the president of the art club. And then I will engage others into like, you know, you know, being enthusiastic about drawing and I will make drawings for the theater club. They will have events and I will make up, you know, an illustration for that or for graduation for little programs and I made a mural for the volleyball tournament (laughs). So that

was high school and then in college having this success uh in the commercial sector gave my parents uh confidence, you know, to support me uh. So I think if it was not for that experience, it was immediately after, or like during my last year as an undergrad, I was taken by this gallery and I had a painting career that lead me to live in Paris. I live in Paris for one year. That was the first time I left Puerto Rico. That was a fellowship for Puerto Rican painters and that was the first time I left, I came back to Puerto Rico. I taught drawing class at the school that I graduated, the undergrad school for, I think for uh summer or so. And I applied to the school of the R Institute and I actually didn't get in the MFA program right away. I got into a program called the post-baccalaureate and I joined that program for a year and I loved it. I loved the school. It was really hard for me. I thought I knew English till I got there (laughs). I know my English is terrible (laughs). Yeah, but I felt enthusiastic about the prospect of becoming an artist. It was something that it was not something that existed in my family, around my family, and also ended up being the first one having a master's degree in my family. So, these things I didn't expect them to happen, but I kind of make me a whole person (laughs). I love this how you were young, where you were a child, and you were experimenting in the kiln, you know, like, I mean, I can only imagine how stimulating that must have been. I mean, I imagine it was also a very large one as well, if you're making a, if it's a commercial. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, you live in the backyard of our home, and there's actually there's a display in the garage of my home in Puerto Rico that still have many of these figures. I took a picture of it recently and I told my brother, "Please never never get rid of this. This is kind of amazing that there's a whole closet full of these figurines (yes!) that make no sense. You know, like where they come from. Well, you know, there's all kinds of you can travel the world through these figurines. You know, they're kind of amazing. And also, I don't know, consider junk, you know, as well, you know, but yeah, they're fasci...it's fascinating. And many of them are not even, they were not put through the Kim. So they are not, how you say, I forgot the term, but they are not complete, you know. Oh, wow. And here you are. Oh, these years later, are still experimenting (laughs). Yes, I love it. Okay. So I'm really interested in your international experiences. Uh You know, you, you've mentioned that you studied in Paris or France, and then of course you studied in the US, being from Puerto Rico. And then also you were part of the MacArthur Foundation's international connections. Can you talk about the role that global travel has played in your artistic development? Yes, I think every time I do, I travel, I is such a fulfilling moment because it really opens up a new, a new door. It really kind of allows me to expand my connection to the projects that I'm doing. And in the case of graft, you know, that this project is the one that like brought me to the MacArthur grants and the experience in Cuba and seeing the Quebrasoles there, it's very different than what I actually imagine because uhm they're way more prominent in Puerto Rico. But the experience in in Brazil, you know, in Salvador, it was ready for feeling because there's a lot of this domestic architecture in Brazil as well. So they, I mean, these motifs are all over the world. And I do focus on the ones that live in Puerto Rico to call for the African influence. But the traveling itself, it really have allowed me to to also grow as a person. I just felt that I never imagine my life outside of Puerto Rico when I was in high school. And I don't think I imagine myself living the rest of my life in Puerto Rico. I need to go to Puerto Rico. And I will always go to Puerto Rico. And it's, it's, you know, I live in Puerto Rico more than anywhere else. I still haven't lived more in Chicago than in Puerto Rico. I lived 27 years of my life there. So that's the great thing about having all

these uh experiences and moving back and forth uh is that But it also allowed me to see Puerto Rico in a very different lens and also put myself in the position of somebody that don't know Puerto Rico. It's like rediscovering my island. And I think all of that is really containing this project. The archives that are embedded in the viewfinders where you can see the little pictures are very organic as well. Like uh there's pictures that I took 10 years ago and there's pictures that I took yesterday and I will put them together. So I really don't follow any rules about editions and organizing. I think the archives and memories are some, are things that are very organic in your life. And when you start building a narrative, sometimes you need something from the past to connect with something that you will be covering your present to be able to tell the story. Wow, OK. Yes, absolutely. I want to like snap my fingers at that (laughs). I want to go back and like copy that sentence down and make that like one of the the features (laughs). That's good. It's just, it's just, you know, I have learned so much about the relations between US and Puerto Rico through this exhibition at the Whitney. I'm so grateful to be, you know, there at this time and have been like so intimate, you know, with that show um and with your work. And uh I mean, now it's like I look, I also I'm looking at it, you know, I look at the relations completely different. And I've been there before. And um now I want to go back, you know, with what I know now, because I had, you know, like I did not. And I think, you know, as you're probably kind of sort of what you're alluding to a lot of people in the US, don't know these, these things, you know, and um, and I think this the brilliance about arts, you know, as it's the way that it teaches us and also you artists, you know, and that's one of the reasons why I am doing the type of research and studies that I do looking at artists as teachers and looking at art as teaching. So you are a multidisciplinary artist and now even a curator. What feelings, ideas, events are important to your artistic practices and your curatorial choices? Yeah, that's a great question. I usually, when I organize exhibitions that I have in the past, they are somewhat weed with the kinds of work that I'm doing at the time, because I think I'm seeking for expanding my own personal knowledge about what I'm doing. Sometimes I can make something that comes from a very, a Gut feeling truly. Just like I, I'm, I really like to obey my, you know, like my intuition when I'm making art. And uh I let that sometimes simmer and be like, I will understand it fully. And sometimes it will take me a while, but I have to let it exist. because I think when something, you know, like uh, that comes maybe from my imagination and from life knowledge, you know, things take shape and form and I sometimes feel like, well, I think I have to really let it out. It's like being a vessel that is like shooting, transforming, you know, and all these representations, I think they have something to do with that, manifesting. Yeah (laughs). Yeah. um What brought you to curating? I always think it's so interesting when artists are curating or, you know, just different people curating. And so this idea of like, thinking about who is a curator, who can be a curator, you know, and I think it's so interesting. There's so many artists also curating. So what brought you to curating? Yeah, well, to me, it made a lot of sense at some point. I think I started curating in a very intuitive way. I love art so much. I really am an admirer of art. I really love and fascinated by other artists and their work. So um I would like to, I like learning about other artists and what are the motivations. And uh when I was a student at the School of the Art Institute, I had access to viewing the studios at any time. I can just like maybe knock the door or like look through a curtain and see what's happening. And in my mind, I will build these installations with other people's work. And I did have the opportunity to curate the first exhibition that I ever

curated. It was titled Glam Salon (laughs). And it was like uh a take on a beauty salon with all these artifacts that that were made by different female identify artists. Like a chandelier made with these uh test tubes. There was this like pictures of imprints of kisses. Uhm There were these wigs that were made with rice and different raw materials that were like food. Like there was a wing, a wig made with chicken wings. (laughing) Yeah. And so all the very like crazy powerful work, there was a performance artist bathing in a hammock with fruit (laughs). Well, it was just nuts, you know? But uh yeah, that was the first, my first time. And I really didn't understand much the concept of curation or that role in art is not something that I ...I really, I was not taught about this in college. I learned that at the Art Institute, you know? And after grad school, I think maybe a year or so after grad school, I learned about the artist run community in Chicago. And that UH was so inspiring. Like I was fascinated by, you know, the all these relationships that artists supporting artists, and through that relationship, many things happen, including creating my project space that is titled "The Franklin" because I live in Franklin Boulevard. And it's uh uh kind of like a Gaseval type of project spaces, outdoors, but it is like a house that have a ceiling and you have six walls that are removable. And the first time I made the Franklin, it was in collaboration with my husband, and we built part of the structure of the Franklin and we placed it in a gallery. And inside the gallery, we show part of our collection, art collection. And the collection that we have is because we both love art and we have bought some art through the years. But also the collection is, you know, the consequence of my relationship with artists that I have met throughout the years and trading, trading work with artists. So that's one part of the collection, the other party thinks that we have purchased mmm-hmmm nonprofit organizations and artist run spaces or or at auctions for uh nonprofit artist run spaces. And uh gifts, there's a lot of art that have been gifted to us. Because artists know that we put the work on the walls and we talk about them. So I don't know There's a lot of kind of celebration, energy that is really unique. And Yeah, I think that that influenced my uh... Just my, you know, my desire for, for putting work together of different artists. And sometimes I think of it as making an installation with other people's work. But curation is, you know, way more complicated than that. But that's that's how I usually start, you know, when I have an idea for an exhibition. And, you know, sometimes thematic exhibitions and things that allow me to learn about that particular subject. Right. Right. I love that how you're thinking about your relationships and your excitement. It's almost like that idea about the art party uhm is coming back, you know, like curating is sort of like, you know, this opportunity to bring all these artists together. To be our last question, as a woman artist, what advice would you give to other women artists um or your young child self getting ready to you know embark on this journey that would lead you towards arts. So, yeah, as a woman, what advice would you give to other women artists coming up? I will say support other female artists. I think that is so important because uh you have to be a conscious decision, you know, like you have to be very purposeful about it. And sometimes, you know, in these art, the ecosystem of the art world, there's so many, so many females on on leading positions that are not enough supportive to other female artists. And that could be disappointing, you know, so that will be my main advice (laughs), Support, support one another. Yes, I love it. And uh thank you for supporting me and being part of this conversation. Thank you for your patience as well (laughs). I'm patient. You know, I'll definitely be patient. I'll be persistent. And I'm just so, you know, I'm so, so grateful more than anything



else. And um thank you. Likewise. Likewise. Thank you. I'm so grateful for your invitation and for connecting with you. You're so kind. Yes, yes, and I and I think we're going to be dancing (laughs). Yeah, I think so. Okay, great. Thank you (laughs). Are you ready? Yes, our party continues (LAUGHS). Yay, glad you had me. [Laughter] Yay. I mentioned rejas and I just want to point out that that is the Spanish word for "fences."