

Miami-Dade College enters rare partnership with contemporary artists



Frances Trombly and Leyden Rodriguez-Casanova in the Miami-Dade College Wolfson Campus building that will house Dimensions Variable in September. (Francesco Casale/Courtesy)



By **Phillip Valys** · Contact Reporter

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Dimensions Variable, an artist-run gallery that has moved four times over its six-year lifespan, has landed a new home with perks on Miami-Dade College's Wolfson Campus.

The nonprofit outfit is run by artist couple Frances Trombly and Leyden Rodriguez-Casanova, who signed an eight-year, rent-free lease to operate on the downtown campus. The partnership with the college, inked in late December, gives the duo independent control over programming the campus' 3,000-square-foot Centre Gallery when it re-opens in September.

"Space is one of the most expensive things for any gallery presenting contemporary art, so to get it donated for our entire existence is a major leg up," says Rodriguez-Casanova, who opened Dimensions Variable in 2009.

Handing contemporary-art programming to an independent studio is an unusual move for Miami-Dade College, says Jeremy Mikolajczak, curator of the Centre Gallery. The college has never donated space to a local gallery before, and Mikolajczak says he's never heard of a Florida college entering a similar partnership.

"I loved the types of exhibitions they were doing," says Mikolajczak, also executive director of the college's nearby Museum of Art + Design. "They have the backing of the Knight Foundation. The big selling point for me were their artist residencies, flying in big international artists to interact with our students. It's a huge plus."

Rodriguez-Casanova says he was growing "road-weary" of hunting for new spaces almost every year since Dimensions Variable opened, a daunting task that involved packing, unpacking and planting roots only in galleries that donated free space. Before their move in October, Dimensions Variable's last rent-free tenant was the gallery Downtown Art House, an ex-fish market just sold for demolition to developers of the new megamall complex Miami Worldcenter. Before that: a rent-free agreement at a studio in the Design District.

Rodriguez-Casanova says Miami-Dade College is also paying electricity and other monthly utilities, along with staffing the to-be-renovated gallery with security guards. In exchange, the nonprofit Dimensions Variable will pay "half the cost" of renovating the Brutalist-style

Centre Gallery with exhibition space and three studios, he says.

The studios are crucial to Rodriguez-Casanova and Trombly, who have spent their gallery's existence catering to rising international artists, a roster that has included massive installations by painters Lynne Golub Gelfman and Jenny Brillhart and Icelandic performance artist Magnus Sigurdarson.

"Our methodology has always been exposing culture to Miami, and not doing it half-assed," says Rodriguez-Casanova, whose *Dimensions Variable* won a Knight grant in 2011. "It doesn't do a city good to host just local artists, because you're showcasing in a vacuum. So our process became, 'Let's have international artists and give them residencies.'"

And the transformed Centre Gallery's first artist will be Leyla Cárdenas, of Colombia. She will use refuse from the gallery's renovation — drywall, wallpaper, rebar — to pay tribute to its history in the 1970s and 1980s as a haven for homegrown artists hungry for fame.

"So many contemporary-art greats passed through this gallery in the past before Art Basel — Ana Mendieta, Naomi Fisher, Hernan Bas, Carlos Alfonzo," Rodriguez-Casanova says. "It's so rich in history, and we must celebrate that."

Dimensions Variable will open in September on Miami-Dade College's Wolfson Campus, 300 NE Second Ave., in Miami. For gallery updates, call 305-237-7710, or go to MDC.edu or DimensionsVariable.net