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Art & Design

Garlic and Greens captures the history of soul food

Archeworks instructor Fereshteh Toosi creates a multimedia art project inspired by the Great Migration

By Clarisa Ramirez



Pam St. Louis (left) and Fereshteh Toosi.

Photo: Courtesy of Fereshteh Toosi

Fereshteh Toosi wants people to talk about soul food. The 35-year-old artist is collecting stories about the cuisine that African-Americans brought from the South during the Great Migration, when they planted okra, garlic, greens, red beans and yams in their Chicago gardens. She's starting GARLIC & GREENS, a soul-food oral history archive, which will be accessible online, as a fellow at Archeworks, the socially engaged design school in River North.

GARLIC & GREENS grew out of Toosi's involvement in an Archeworks project in Washington Park, a predominantly African-American neighborhood on the South Side. As Archeworks designed "barrier-free" community gardens that are accessible to people with

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disabilities, Toosi thought about her clients' access to locally grown food, how they prepare food and their connections to their cultural heritage. The Iranian-born artist finds it difficult to obtain ingredients for her own family recipes. She became interested in creating a space—social, if not physical—where people could talk about their personal histories with food. “I believe we need to look at the way in which we're more similar than different,” Toosi says.

Two men who collaborated on Archeworks' garden project had aphasia, an impairment of language ability caused by strokes. “When I was working with them, I realized to be accessible we needed to think of all of the different ways of communicating,” the artist recalls. “There's a huge range of disabilities that aren't physical.” Because African-Americans have a high risk for sight loss due to glaucoma, diabetes or hypertensive retinopathy, Toosi plans to publish some of the stories she's collecting in a tactile book meant for readers with low or no vision, which she'll produce through Archeworks this fall. “We live in a world where the visual is really dominant, but art isn't just visual,” she says. “I want to draw attention to other senses because they are just as important for experiencing the world.”

GARLIC & GREENS taps into Toosi's skills as a sound artist. Her 2008 project *Up the Creek*, created just before she moved to Chicago, addresses concerns about a sewage plant's leakage into Onondaga Creek in Syracuse, New York. Participants can download and listen to Toosi's audio documentary—a blend of interviews, narratives and ambient sound—as they tour the creek. “With an audio walk, I was able to show a portrait of a place that has changed over a long period of time,” she explains.

The artist will compile recipes and anecdotes for GARLIC & GREENS during two free public events that she organized to encourage dialogues about Chicago's food heritage and the Great Migration. On Friday 22 at [Access Living \(115 W Chicago Ave\)](#), “INTERSECTIONS: exploring disability, race and community through art and culture” brings together speakers Lynn Manning, a poet, playwright and performer; Wannapa Pimtong-Eubanks, a member of [Erasing the Distance](#), a theater group raising awareness of mental illness; and Alana Wallace, founder of [Dance>Detour](#), a diverse-abilities dance company.

On August 6, the [DuSable Museum of African American History](#) hosts “JOURNEYS: exploring Black culture through migration history and food heritage” with historian Timuel Black and writer Audrey Petty.

“Other artists do things like shuffling pieces of paper around or drawing,” Toosi says. “I have a great interest in social history and sciences, and my research and inspiration comes through by planning these events.”

To contribute a story to GARLIC & GREENS, call 312-870-0GNG. For more information, visit [garlicandgreens.info](#).

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