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[Interview] Chicago Artist Fereshteh Toosi Explores The Definition Of Soul Food

GALLERY BY [TURNSTYLE](#) ON JANUARY 24, 2012

Photo: Garlic & Greens Logo/Jamie Sebold

By Whitney Henry-Lester

Fereshteh Toosi is an interdisciplinary, Chicago-based artist who works with art you can interact with. While designing a community garden accessible to people with disabilities, she began her latest project: [Garlic & Greens](#). Inspired by her interest in growing food and cultural migration, Garlic & Greens aims to capture soul food stories in Chicago. She also teaches art at Columbia College Chicago. Turnstyle contributor Whitney Henry-Lester spoke to Toosi about her new project and the documentation of soul food.

How do you describe yourself as an artist and the art that you like to make?

I collect and recombine sounds, words, images, and actions. I'm interested in migration issues, social geography, and sustainability. I enjoy exploring the history and people of a particular place, and I like working with other people and I like working outside of traditional gallery spaces. Sometimes the work I make doesn't seem like art, and that's ok. I don't really care if it's understood as art or not.

How did your interest in art begin?

I get a lot of satisfaction from taking material meant for one thing and using it in an unusual way, transforming it into something

unexpected. My art education was in a liberal arts context, and as a result I've always been focused more on concepts and ideas than on purely technical explorations.

Tell me about the ARCHEWORKS Garden project and how it evolved into Garlic and Greens.

GARLIC & GREENS began at Archeworks, a multidisciplinary design school in Chicago. Our collaborative team was designing for a site at the north end of Chicago's Washington Park. The garden project we developed was called INSPIRE! Gardens for all. At Archeworks we were developing a multi-modal project that included a toolkit to help groups who wanted to create dynamic, accessible community gardens for people with disabilities. Among other things, we wrote gardening tutorials for people with stroke-related disabilities and designed outdoor furniture for a high school located on our site. The team was full of amazing people and ideas and they all played a role shaping GARLIC & GREENS.

GARLIC & GREENS was motivated by my perspective on our design dilemma. I was bothered by the fact that none of us on the design team were directly connected to the culture and history of this black neighborhood where our project site was located. There are a lot of ways to do good socially-engaged, participatory design, but ultimately, the best design happens when the users can play a direct role in developing creative solutions for their own community. Designers have a lot of power, and it's hard to find ways to distribute it. We need to be mindful that the people and history of a place are its strongest assets. I really felt like race and cultural difference was an elephant in the room that we needed to address head on. GARLIC & GREENS my best idea for solution using the skills I had with audio and oral history.

So what is Garlic & Greens?

GARLIC & GREENS offers public programs on migration history, food heritage, social justice, the arts, and disability studies. There were two events scheduled in the summer of 2011. Phase One of the project focused on the production of free public events showcasing the work of artists and community experts, Phase Two of the project focuses on collecting and sharing food and migration stories. The final product will be a multi-media art experience accessible for people with visual disabilities and their allies.

Why are you focusing on food? Are you telling food stories or people stories or a community stories? How do they intersect?

GARLIC & GREENS focuses on food because of how the project evolved from a community garden design initiative. At Archeworks, we were doing a bit of landscape architecture, and with that you get to choose the plants. We threw around ideas about what it would mean to have a soul food garden: okra, garlic, beans, yams, collards, turnip greens, kale, et cetera. That's when I started thinking about the cultural connections between gardening and the personalities and histories of the people who garden. Gardens are very personal, they're curated spaces where you get to grow things that you like or that are important to you. If you don't like eating okra, you're probably not going to grow it. Or you may decide to grow it because it's an interesting tropical-looking plant that has a devastatingly beautiful flower.

People grow foods that are connected to their homelands and the places they have lived. Unlike commercial farming, gardens can reflect not only the climate of the place, but also the desires of the growers, their tastes, and cultural backgrounds. I wanted to create a way to address this cultural aspect of gardening while focusing particularly on stories from African American residents who live in the neighborhoods around Washington Park. Since our team was focusing on issues around accessibility for people with disabilities, a multi-sensory approach seemed like a way to go about it.

I'm an enthusiastic edible gardener, and I like interviewing people about their lives, so the two elements came together naturally for me. The stories are about food, but they are more about people's attitudes to food...I want to talk to people about what they do know, and also to use the interviews as a way to hear about the cultural histories of foods that are important to people as part of their family traditions.

What are you asking people?

I ask people where they live and where their people are from. Has their family lived in Chicago for many generations? When did they move here? I also ask them to describe a favorite family food tradition or a cherished family recipe. I ask the person to describe its preparation in the kitchen. I'll ask the person how they learned to cook, and who in the family does the cooking. Who carries food traditions in the family? I'll also ask them to define soul food. I don't really go through a list of questions one by one, but these are the topics and questions I focus on, while allowing the conversation to evolve as things come up.

Have you defined what "soul food" is?

The question about defining soul food has been a favorite of mine as most people have expressed a sensibility that goes beyond race or geographic location. In an interview with 10 year-old Malik, we hear a young person struggling with the assertion that black people eat a certain kind of food. He seems uncomfortable (rightfully so) with the notion that people of different races should claim ownership over a particular food at all.

I like the connections that are emerging from the definitions that people have shared with me during the interviews. Soul food can be defined in a lot of ways, but it is often traced back to West Indian, Caribbean, and African influences. It's southern American cooking that is often connected to African American traditions. Some of these evolved from the inventiveness of people who were slaves, who had to make-do with what little they had, taking advantage of every part of the animal and creating flavorful, filling food from limited resources. But this doesn't begin to cover to what soul food really means. Soul food refers to comfort food, home cooking, and cooking from the heart. It's food that is prepared from scratch with care and love. In that sense, every culture has a type of soul food.

What have you learned from the project thus far?

I'm learning how to be a better ally for people with disabilities. The first step was educating myself about the diverse ways ability and disability are defined. I've learned that we need to work on better design for people with disabilities. This includes products but also how to create events that are accessible and how to design cities and communities that are inclusive. I've also learned more about the history of domestic migration in the U.S. Though I knew about it before, I've learned more about the details, specifically with black Americans movement within the U.S. Some people call it the "Great Migration", but in GARLIC & GREENS I refer to it in the plural, "Great Migrations", because it happened in waves and it continues. Recently I've read some stories about how some black people are moving back to the south, and I'm curious to look at the numbers in a few years, to know how this rates as another wave of the migrations.

There is a focus on visual impairment with this project. Why?

When I was at Archeworks, two members of our team had stroke-related aphasia. In order to communicate with them, the group relied on written communication, such as real-time transcription of conversations. Aphasia impacts one's ability to produce or understand words. It is not related to loss of vision, but this factor prompted a consideration of how garden programming would necessitate communication in multiple forms: audio, tactile, written, and experiential. During the research and development phase for GARLIC & GREENS, it became clear that adjusting the project's physical infrastructure would not be adequate to becoming fully accessible. I began to see a need for connecting the traditions of vegetable gardening to cooking traditions through multi-sensory approaches. Considering the people who have been participating in the project, GARLIC & GREENS has been making a special effort to reach audiences with low or no vision because African Americans are at a higher risk for sight loss from glaucoma, diabetes and hypertensive retinopathy. The good news is that these diseases can be prevented with a healthy diet and regular access to health care.

What will the final product be?

The final product will be an interactive project about food heritage. I'm still working on the details, but I know it will be a hand-made, limited edition multi-sensory documentary package that includes audio, tactile and aromatic elements.

All photos by Fereshteh Toosi



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