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MUSEUMS ENTERTAINMENT

A Long Walk Home continues to honor, to empower with ‘Black Girlhood Altar,’ on view Friday

By DARCEL ROCKETT
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The Chicago-based nonprofit A Long Walk Home hasn't been idle during the pandemic.

As an art organization that empowers young people to end violence against girls and women, A Long Walk Home has been continuing to center Black girls. The result of their months-long work will be on view Friday, June 18, in the courtyard of the Weinberg/Newton Gallery. “The Visibility Project: Black Girlhood Altar” is a community monument to missing and murdered Black girls that traveled to three other Chicago communities in May.



Artists, from left, Scheherazade Tillet, Robert Narciso, and Leah Gipson, members of the non-profit arts organization A Long Walk Home, stand in front of their installation “Black Girlhood Altar” on the grounds of the Weinberg/Newton Gallery, June 16, 2021. (Abel Uribe / Chicago Tribune)

These monuments were created by A Long Walk Home as part of the [gallery’s Art & Advocacy Residency](#) that began in April with participating artists Scheherazade Tillet, Robert Narciso and Leah Gipson. Conceived as an expansion of the gallery’s mission to raise awareness for social justice issues, the residency awarded artists the use of the 2,200-square-foot gallery space over 12 weeks, with a stipend.

“We’re really thinking of this as truly an outgrowth or an extension of our social justice mission,” said Kasia Houlihan, director of the Weinberg/Newton Gallery. “It’s really another way of what we’ve always done, which is offering our space as a resource to artists, activists, community organizers, as well as nonprofit organizations. And positioning artists as leaders — leaders of hard conversations and as change makers.”

The project has engaged Black girls and young women in Chicago as citizen-artists to research and create the altars, while using the experience to advocate for change within their communities. Everything from photos, double Dutch ropes, dolls, teddy bears are featured in the exhibit.

ALWH co-founder Tillet likens the altars to those from the Day of the Dead, designed to honor those who are no longer with us. They also offer a space for healing after COVID, after the Black Lives Matter protests. It's a place for advocacy that is both celebratory and restorative.

“We’re in this project to elevate certain stories from this moment, as artists and as advocates,” Tillet said. “I think it’s so important, this kind of story where Black girls are honored. We have a lot to remember and fight for, and I hope someday we don’t have to do make these kinds of altars, that we can do more celebratory altars. That’s our goal.”



These portraits by Scheherazade Tillet, and designs by Leah Gipson, of A Long Walk Home collective, serve as an inspiration for their installation "Black Girlhood Altar." (Abel Uribe / Chicago Tribune)

The Long Walk Home Collective is focused on finding ways for communities to come together to grieve, celebrate life and make sustainable changes in their own communities. The three previous altar installation sites were at the Grand Motel, 10022 S. Halsted St. on May 2, in collaboration with the organization [Coalition for Hope](#); the Museum of Contemporary Art Garden on May 22, in collaboration with the MCA's Teen Creative Agency; and on Rainbow Beach, at Farragut and South Shore Drive, on May 23.

“A large part of the residency was bringing the art to the community,” Narciso said. “That it doesn’t exist in the gallery walls. We agreed to do it in the courtyard, but the emphasis was to bring this altar to a space that isn’t in an institution. It’s supposed to activate the community in a way to bring art back to the community and get them thinking about the power that art embodies.”

“We’re anchoring the ideas that we have as artists in creating a space that really centers Black girlhood as the site for freedom,” Gipson said. “We think about Black girls, we think about their freedom — how does that transform everything around them? How does that then transform a family, a neighborhood, a community, a city, a nation, a world — how does that happen? I think our work as artists is envisioning that collectively with community members.”



Artists, from left, Robert Narciso, Scheherazade Tillet, and Leah Gipson, put the finishing touches on their installation "Black Girlhood Altar" on the grounds of the Weinberg/Newton Gallery. (Abel Uribe / Chicago Tribune)

The altar on Friday will honor the young Black girls that A Long Walk Home has been working with — Black girls who were vital in this moment: the caregivers, the essential workers, those who’ve been leading the marches and protests. This last altar, before the work travels, will be a healing sanctuary; Tillet and Gipson are asking people to bring offerings.

“It’s a meditative space where people can take in the night, being outside, being together,” Tillet said. “We did this project at such a pivotal time in our community — where we’re reemerging back in society. We’re in a different place now with the pandemic; that’s what’s great about this specific time and this idea of freedom.”

The Black Girlhood Altar: Healing Sanctuary will be 7-10 p.m. on Friday, June 18. It’s free and open to the public in the Weinberg/Newton Gallery courtyard. Images of scenes from the other altars will be shown in a window installation at the through June 26.

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Darcel Rockett is a writer and curious soul — the latter informing the former. Her curious nature has led her to write for news organizations in London, the Virgin Islands, Los Angeles and Phoenix. Currently, she writes lifestyle pieces for the Chicago Tribune, where she’s served as a digital editor and features reporter for a decade.
