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Charmaine Minniefield resurrects the
Praise House Project

BY KAMILLE D. WHITTAKER

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Charmaine Minniefield was due to return home to Atlanta from the Gambia on March 16, 2020, when her flight was abruptly canceled, and the West African country's borders shuttered.

When the borders reopened eight months later, the artist-activist—who had been across the Atlantic on an Emory University-sponsored fellowship to study and create art around the legacy of Black worship practices—reemerged transformed.

"I was stranded there with my six-year-old because of the pandemic, and we had to put roots down and make a home," she says. "And that happened for me artistically—I went deeper into the reason I was there and in response to what was happening in the world."

That meant "going into prayer," and diving into the origins of the ring shout tradition, an African American practice with West African roots. "We would gather in a circle and do call-and-response, singing and uplifting voices together," she says.

Before Emancipation, laws in the American South prohibited enslaved people from observing their indigenous traditions, such as drumming, or gathering for any purpose other than worship. The intention was to prevent them from forming communities or preserving their cultural heritage. In response, enslaved people built small wooden structures called praise houses, where they would gather for worship in a circle—shouting and stomping rhythmically instead of drumming. These structures are thought to have been the precursors of the first Black churches in the Western world.

Upon her return, Minniefield sought to commemorate these traditions through her Praise House Project—a series of public art installations and interventions at historic sites around the Atlanta area. "The Praise House itself is a site-specific installation—a full replica of wooden praise houses," says Minniefield. "But when you walk inside, you're inside of an immersive visual experience through digital projection of film footage, and still images collected from archives and actual performances of the ring shout both here and in the Gambia."

Supported by Flux Projects, the Oakland Cemetery Praise House was erected in 2021 to commemorate Juneteenth.



Minniefield erected the first Praise House last year on June 19—Juneteenth—at Oakland Cemetery as part of a multiyear collaboration with Flux Projects entitled *Remembrance as Resistance: Preserving Black Narratives*. To reach the installation honoring the more than 800 enslaved people who are buried there in unmarked graves, visitors had to walk past row after row of headstones for Confederate soldiers.

Now a series supported by Emory and the National Endowment for the Arts, the Praise House Project will deliver its next installation this month with a similar intervention: The structure will permanently replace

the 112-year-old United Daughters of the Confederacy monument, recently removed from Decatur Square.

Minniefield promises another praise house—again on Juneteenth—at South-View Cemetery, the final resting place of many prominent Black Atlantans. And in the fall of 2022, a final replica will be built on Emory's campus to acknowledge the university's ongoing research in the areas of slavery, dispossession, and restorative justice, and to honor Dr. Pellom McDaniels, an archivist and curator of African American collections at Emory's rare book library, who died in 2020.

As complements to the praise houses, Minniefield has created a series of two-dimensional self-portraits using indigo, crushed oyster shells, and mahogany bark depicting herself gripped in a ring shout. The *Indigo Prayers* (pictured, left) solo exhibition is set to open at Emory's Carlos Museum this spring.

"I remembered what my ancestors did during the hardest of times: We performed the ring shout, sometimes in secret places, and in those secret spaces and praise houses, we affirmed our Blackness," she says. "We were African, we harnessed our power, we found our medicine—and we danced." 1