

Future Archive: Audio Stories

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

February 10 - May 8, 2022

A Community Project and Installation in conjunction with *Being Muholi: Portraits as Resistance*

Ifé Franklin, Artist and Community Activist (she/her)

Transcript of ~9-minute Audio Story

KEY:

IF: Ifé Franklin

AG: Arielle Gray

IF: I came out in 1981 in the Bay Area. I totally, absolutely came out and I have not looked back because it's who I am.

AG: Ifé Franklin is and has been many things. She's an artist, who works in multiple mediums. She was a singer and musician in multiple bands in the 1990s. But in Ifé own words, she is-

IF: I'm an artist, that's for sure. Unbound artists, human being. Lesbian, Black femme, strong femme. I'm just expanding, you know, and more than anything, I just want to be free. That's it.

AG: My name is Arielle Gray and you are listening to the *Future Archives*, a project and installation at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

As an artist and reporter, I'm constantly thinking about documentation. And as a Black queer woman, I know often times, those most marginalized have no say in how they're represented in our archives, if we're represented at all. Future Archives highlights the stories of 5 Black queer and trans people here in, in their own words.

It's a cold, winter day when I meet Ifé at her Roxbury apartment.

[EFX: Light jazz plays in the background as Arielle and Ifé set up their recording]

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AG: Her space looks exactly how I imagined it. Light pours in through large windows. Her art pieces are showcased around her house. Beyond the living room, I see a slice of color that can only be her art studio. Ifé gives me a peek inside.

She's done everything, from music to fabric dyeing to the construction of her slave cabin project, which was installed at Franklin Park and the Fitchburg Art Museum. But really, the best way to describe Ifé is as an-

IF: Unbound artist because I don't have these boundaries. If I want to create something, I'm going to do that. So that's my new title, as of last week, I'm Ifé Franklin, unbound artist.

AG: Ifé has spent decades creating and living in Boston but her story didn't start here. It started in Washington D.C.

IF: I was born in 1960. I remember the assassinations of MLK of Malcolm of the Kennedys. I remember all of this, the burning of my city. I remember this.

AG: Ifé grew up as a self-described "tomboy," scaling rooftops and playing football with the neighborhood boys. But one thing she knew, growing up queer in the height of the Black power movement, was that she was somehow not like others in her family.

IF: I don't know if this is true but the thing that I have heard from the things that I have experienced about collective folk being queer is that you always know that you're different.

AG: Ifé knew that the people around her told her she should like boys... but she didn't.

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IF: You know, there comes a time when you like, have that first kiss with a girl. I think I was like 10 or something. But you know, you were supposed to like boys.

AG: Comments from family friends also bothered Ifé.

IF: And they would say things like, “Such and such is as a bulldagger, na na na na na na na.”

AG: “Bulldagger” is a pejorative and offensive term often used to describe masculine presenting lesbians.

IF: So I was thinking one day, we just kept talking about this. Well, I'm like, Why are they talking about bull dagger around me? Like, What is that? What is that? I knew it was something, and then somebody with somebody said, “You don't want to be that.” And I was like, “OK... I guess I don't want to be that.”

AG: Years later, Ifé left for college in Minneapolis. And things started to change.

IF: Before I'm officially out, I'm hanging out with the gay men. I'm going to the bars. I'm having a good time, but I'm not gay.

AG: But one night-

IF: This woman approaches me and I'm freaking out, I'm like, “Woah what's happening here?” And my friends say, “Because you're gay.” and I'm like, “Really?” And then you're like, yeah, oh, then then the flood comes back. The girlfriends from your younger, the crushes

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AG: From Minneapolis, Ifé moved to the Bay Area to attend the California School of Arts and Crafts. The Bay Area was (and still is) home to one of the largest LGBTQ+ communities in the country. Ifé was in her element.

IF: I'm in the Bay Area and I just come the fuck out, okay?

AG: Ifé found people who were just like her. More importantly, she found Black people who were just like her. Soon after moving, Ifé meets and falls in love with her first true girlfriend, at an outdoor market.

IF: And I'm looking at this jewelry and I feel this thing. And Spirit says, "Look up" and I look up and I look up and it was the most handsome person, the most beautiful person I had ever seen looking at me and I almost I almost fainted.

AG: From living across the street from Black poet and lesbian Pat Parker to photographing Toni Morrison's reading for her book "Song of Solomon," Ifé crossed paths with extraordinary Black women in her early.

IF: A lot of the love that I knew as an adult. I got from Black lesbian women, my education, I got from Black lesbian women.

AG: Eventually, Ifé moved to Boston and attended the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. She built a new home in a new city. In 1996, she was invited by B.J. Winston to showcase a piece in an exhibition about Black women at Northeastern.

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IF: I wanted to put this particular piece in that says “Yo Black, Gay and Lesbian Pride.” And as you can see, it has a picture of Ma Rainey, it has a picture of Langston Hughes. It has a picture of Bessie Smith. And it has images of people from Africa, okay?

AG: Ifé put her place card with the title of her piece in at the exhibit. But shortly after, Winston told Ifé that she could not be a part of the show.

IF: Betty Winston read this and said, “You cannot put this piece in there.” I said, “You haven't seen the piece.” “You cannot put it in there because it talks about being gay.” And she went on to say that, you know, “This is deviant. This is this, you know, it's sex. We don't want any sexual stuff? We don't want any political stuff. I said, I'm Black. That's political. What are you talking about? Like it was this whole?”

AG: What baffled Ifé the most was that Winston and others hadn't even seen her piece yet.

IF: They assumed that it was sexual. They didn't care who was in it. I said, “Langston Hughes is in it, he was gay, everyone knows that.” “We're not talking about that.” This is what they said.

AG: The show was canceled. Soon after, the Boston Globe picked up the story and put out a piece on the discrimination Ifé experienced.

[EFX: Ifé reading the Boston Globe piece, play for 13 seconds and then fade down and under next track.]

AG: While there haven't been many in-depth studies on homophobia in the Black community, those of us who are Black and queer know that it rears its ugly head, more often than we'd like. In Ifé's case, that homophobia came from other Black artists.

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IF: There are some prominent African-American hetero cis people who are still alive. Who said to me, “You ruined this, Ifé. You should just leave the show.” Who at this time would see me walking down the street and they cross the street when they saw me. They turned their backs when they saw me.

AG: Ifé’s courage to speak out about the show led to amazing things. She won an award and Ed Strickland, who at the time ran the African American Master Artists Program in Roxbury, invited her to do a one-woman show. From there, her career as an artist only continued to bloom.

AG: From turning her book, “The Slave Narrative of Willie Mae” into a short film-

[**EFX:** An actor reads, “When you gets to the woods I want you to go dis way, there’s markers along the way.”]

AG: To leading community processions around her slave cabin project-

[**EFX:** Collective singing, tambourines, clapping]

AG: Ifé has spent the past few decades perfecting her skills and learning news ones.

AG: At the end of the day, it’s really all about freedom, Ifé says.

IF: Freedom to be, Freedom, to express freedom, to choose this color over that color. Freedom to dream.

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Credits

AG: Thank you so much for listening to this installment of the *Future Archive* project. There is so much we couldn't fit into this story, from Ifé's stint singing for an all-female band called "Sisters of the Yam" to her slave cabin project.

Lead Artist and host is Arielle Gray. Sound is by Palace Shaw. The *Future Archive* project is a community-based exhibition at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.