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Russell's Gullah-inspired dolls tell stories of love, triumph

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Photo by Wanda Jackson. Artist Imani Russell shows off a few of her handcrafted dolls inspired by the Gullah culture.

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By Wanda Jackson

Textile artist Imani Russell's 15-inch doll named "Gullah Girl, Sunday Ready" sports purple boots. Her 18-inch "Earth Angel" doll, a mixed-media work features a pink-embroidered, ankle-length, scalloped-edge fabric dress and wings made from found vines.

Russell calls her dolls "Indigo's Friends," which also is the title of her gallery and creative space in the EZ Storage Studios at 4303 Rhode Island Avenue. Her studio sits in the heart of the Gateway Arts District in Brentwood.

Russell began creating handmade dolls as a way to heal herself following a personal tragedy. Her choice to connect with her creativity put her on a spiritual journey connected to the Gullah culture.

The Gullah are African Americans who live in the low country region of South Carolina and Georgia. The Gullah are known for preserving more of their African linguistic and cultural heritage than any other African American community in the United States. Gullah storytelling, foods, music, folk beliefs, crafts, farming and fishing traditions exhibit strong influences from West and Central African cultures.

Russell's Gullah dolls tell stories of survival, triumph and love – wise women, healers, warriors, angels and dancers. Her dolls, some exceeding four feet, feature chocolate brown and ebony forms, yarn, buttons, fabrics, beads and feathers.

"Indigo is a fictional character I discovered in an extraordinary novel I read in the late 1980s," Russell said. "I have read that book many times over the years – each reading more comforting and revealing than the last. After all these years, I am convinced that 'Indigo,' the saltwater child, is my alter ego."

"Saltwater" references low country Georgia communities.

The novel that Russell discovered is "Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo" by award-winning playwright, novelist and poet Ntozake Shange.

Set during the Vietnam War era, Shange's novel tells the story of a mother and her three daughters, African-American natives of Charleston, S.C., descendants of a family of weavers. Indigo is the youngest of the three sisters. Indigo's character borders on the mystical. She talks to her dolls, and she is an avid fiddle player.

Russell's dolls reveal a persona, moral or idea that comprises the fictional world that Indigo inhabits. Each doll is handcrafted with pre-consumer and post consumer materials, found objects, and "most importantly, love," Russell said.

"Every creation is unique, but they all have one thing in common: they are all friends of Indigo," Russell said.

Russell also creates unique utilitarian and wall quilts, scarves, cards, and jewelry.

To discover more about Indigo's Friends studio and gallery, call 202-437-0217 or visit



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- Prince George's County welcomes Indian business
- Lehman, Baker back bag tax at town hall
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www.indigosfriends.com. Studio visits are by appointment.

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