



ILA Creative Studio Challenges Chicago to Reckon With the True Value of Black Art: Black Art Love Affair 2026

Annual celebration and awards gala returns June 17th at Little Black Pearl to invest in the sustainability of the Black arts ecosystem in Chicago

Chicago, May 15, 2026 – I Love Art (ILA) Creative Studio announces the return of its signature fundraising event, [Black Art Love Affair \(BALA\)](#), on **Wednesday, June 17, 2026, at 6 PM at Little Black Pearl, 1060 E. 47th Street, Chicago, IL**. Now in its 4th year, BALA is the engine that allows ILA to provide essential resources and advocacy for Black artists at zero or low cost – and this year's gathering promises to be its most meaningful yet.

This year's theme, *FOR FREE?*, is a direct invitation to grapple with one of the most urgent questions facing the creative sector: what does it mean to ask Black artists to give their labor, their gifts, and their presence – and what does true reciprocity look like in return? As ILA continues to expand its programming and deepen its impact across the city of Chicago, BALA 2026 centers the tension between artistic labor and community investment as both a provocation and a call to action.

On June 17th, ILA will bring together 150 of the city's most influential artists, patrons, and cultural champions to invest in the long-term sustainability of this work.

“The funds raised will go directly toward ensuring that rising and future generations of Black artists in Chicago have access to professional development, community, and resources without financial barriers,” says Rachel Gadson, Founder and Executive Director of ILA Creative Studio. “*FOR FREE?*” asks us all to reckon with what we value and what we're willing to sustain. This annual affair affords us with opportunities to expand our programming so that more people can have free and equal access to such experiences.”

Honoring Chicago's Creative Community

BALA 2026 will also recognize four individuals and organizations whose contributions to the arts ecosystem embody the spirit of collective investment and love. This year's honorees are:

Monica Halsip who will receive the *Rooted Love Award*, presented to institutions and organizations invested in uplifting, supporting, and encouraging diverse voices in the arts in Chicago.

"This recognition is deeply meaningful because it affirms the power of Black art not only as creative expression, but as a force for healing, belonging, and transformation in our communities," says Halsip. "Chicago's Black artists have always shaped culture, challenged narratives, and created beauty in the face of adversity – and it is an honor to stand alongside so many visionaries continuing that legacy.”

Blake Lenoir will receive the *Emerging Love Award*, presented to young, rising artists and art curators paving a way in their practice and for the Black artist community.

"Receiving the Emerging Love Award is deeply humbling and affirming," says Lenoir. "As a Chicago artist, surrealist, futurist, and father, I see Black art as one of our city's most powerful forces for preserving history while boldly reimagining our collective future. This recognition reinforces my commitment to creating transformative work that bridges generations, challenges perception, and expands emotional and cultural understanding through art. Be Art, We Art."

Janell Nelson, Englewood Arts Collective will receive the *Communal Love Award*, presented to individuals who use their platform for the betterment of the arts ecosystem.

"Part of why I love my city so deeply is because we are a people who do — we footwork, freestyle, innovate, organize, and design culture that's copied the world over," says Nelson. "From the legacy of Dr. Margaret Burroughs to the geniuses shaping the city today, Black creativity continues to move Chicago forward."

Robert Earl Paige will receive the *Black Art Love Pioneer* — a distinguished, category-exclusive honor recognizing a Black artist who has shown consistent growth and commitment to their practice, introducing new, innovative ideas to their industry.

Proceeds from BALA directly fund ILA's three signature programs: **G-to-G (Getting to Our Goals)**, a professional development workshop series for working artists; **Hear We Art™**, a community healing experience combining sound and guided visual art-making; and **BLACC**, a digital platform and resource hub connecting artists to opportunities, community, and collaborators across the city.

Tickets are available now at [Eventnoire](#). To become a sponsor or make a gift that directly sustains Black artistry life in Chicago, reach out to admin@ilacreativestudio.com.

About I Love Art (ILA) Creative Studio

ILA Creative Studio is a Chicago-based nonprofit creating intentional spaces that uplift and empower artists, helping them build sustainable careers while fostering an abundant creative community. They envision a thriving, multi-generational community of Black artists who are empowered to create, innovate, and lead. Through workshops, networking, and strategic programming, we aim to eliminate barriers and ensure sustainable artistic futures. Over the last 5 years, we've served and engaged a combined 2700 artists and residents across Chicago, and we look forward to continued growth.

You can learn more about ILA Creative Studio at their website (www.ilacreativestudio.com), and on social ([@ilacreativestudio](#)).

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