

Art in America

We Built This City: A Conversation with Lauren Halsey

By Mark Pieterse | June 7, 2018



View of Lauren Halsey's installation *we still here, there*, 2018, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Photo Zak Kelley.

Energized by Afrofuturist aspirations and love for her home city of Los Angeles, Lauren Halsey makes bright, opulent installations that map the rich heritage of black cultural production onto architectural structures. Neighborhood artifacts, the visual vernaculars associated with jazz and funk music, and studio materials come together to form otherworldly, cosmic landscapes. Her work draws on personal and collective memories to work against precarity, gentrification, and their discontents, making visible the fault lines of history, desire, and political opposition that produce and negotiate space.

"we still here, there," Halsey's solo exhibition at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art's Grand Avenue location on view through September 3, presents installations that include fake plants, rugs, shattered compact discs that form stages for black figurines, as well as sphinxes and other statuettes based on Egyptian iconography. The kaleidoscopic grotto summons themes of resilience and black liberation with its vignettes of pan-African imagery like Ghanaian Kente cloth, the Mafundi logo (which was painted on a building in the Watts neighborhood by artist Elliott Pinkney following the 1965 rebellion there), and Black Panther, alongside signage marking black-owned businesses. Halsey's work is included in the

Hammer Museum's "Made in L.A." biennial, which opened this weekend and remains on view through September 2. In advance of the show, I talked to her about collective suffering and optimism, geographies of resistance, and funk.

MARK PIETERSON You were trained as an architect. Though you never abandoned architecture entirely, what sparked the transition to art?

LAUREN HALSEY While in architecture school, I was remixing the street images of buildings in downtown south central Los Angeles with 1970s and '80s funk aesthetics. I rendered the neighborhood as vibrant collages using images of people, graffiti tags, and signage in local graphic design styles, paying homage to the freestyle and improvisation techniques of hip-hop and jazz, as well as the post-psychedelic black aesthetics of Parliament-Funkadelic, a group that championed non-hegemonic black sociality at the intersection of science fiction and '60s counterculture.

I studied architecture at California College of the Arts, where some assignments were completed with manual drawing, but for the most part we worked with wild computer rendering programs. Our prompts had conceptual and logistic limitations, but they didn't oblige us to consider very real demographics.

PIETERSON Like what exactly?

HALSEY Like class and race. I enjoyed the new experience, but I felt that my interest in architecture as an emancipatory solution to oppressive spatial paradigms in the hood would not be urgent enough, especially if I was going to advance community narratives through building. I decided to leave CCA. First I went back to El Camino Community College, then I transferred to CalArts, where I made only flat works, experimental research drawings, cityscapes of LA, and more blueprints.

PIETERSON When and why did you decide to question the anxieties of gentrification in Los Angeles in your work?

HALSEY I'm from here. Both sides of my family have been here since the Great Migration. We've invested in Los Angeles, specifically South Central Los Angeles, for decades, both collectively as a family unit and as individuals belonging to various communities in the city. Whether it was my grandmother and her six siblings kicking it on Central Avenue with Duke Ellington during the Jazz Age, my father's work with kids at the local park as a coach, tutor, and mentor, or cousins' anti-gentrification activism, we have all made contributions to LA.

PIETERSON These are deep legacies.

HALSEY I'm proud of that. I'm part of that. So I feel compelled to challenge oppressive forces here through my work.



View of Lauren Halsey's installation *The Crenshaw District Hieroglyph Project Prototype Architecture*, 2018, at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Photo Anthony Cran/Wilding Cran Gallery.

PIETERSON In "we still here, there," you challenge displacement by foregrounding a radical desire for presence with the inclusion of black liberationist vernaculars and artifacts through handmade signs calling for reparations, and others for informal businesses like hair braiding. What relationships are you hoping to convey in the environment?

HALSEY I wanted to build a concrete cave with waterfalls that not only functions as a funky transcendental warehouse of artworks and local cultural artifacts, but also continues to accumulate archival materials over the course of the exhibition. I would love for the installation to be constantly used for various programming, but there are many limitations within the museum structure. There have been a few performances, lectures, and scheduled talks in conjunction with the exhibition, but I'm hoping for it to be used more as a platform for other museum activities. We'll see what happens.

PIETERSON I'm struck by how your work creates a critical response to precarity and anti-blackness from the pleasures and traumas of collective experiences.

HALSEY I view history, cultural memory, and the archive I've been gathering for over ten years as tools that can be used to mobilize people towards liberation. I see them as anchors for the process of describing and proposing new spatial paradigms and narratives. I'm not interested in escapism. I'm interested in creating legible, real representations of who we were centuries ago or five minutes ago, and of who we can become five seconds from now or one hundred years from now. I'm interested drawing connections among multiples histories and collective experiences of neighborhoods to consider the here and now, as well as past and potential futures. I truly believe that the process of archiving a place and remixing the content back into that place can be empowering.

PIETERSON Along these lines, where do you place your role as an artist, specifically as an artist of color, in the heavily contested arena of visibility politics and economic justice?

HALSEY I have goals within art and many goals outside of art that involve transcending other people's use of my artistic and non-artistic contributions. I am a queer, black woman building black space in a world full of baggage and mess. I feel excited and inspired by that role. I have no interest in not prioritizing blackness in anything that I do. This is the reason for the work!

PIETERSON What is your interest in hieroglyphics and Egyptian iconography with regard to storytelling and community building?

HALSEY I'm inspired by the function of the hieroglyphs (especially pharaonic sculptures and reliefs) as permanent, magical and spiritual records. I'm obsessed with sampling and remixing ancient Egyptian iconography with my spin on aspirational funky monuments. This interest comes as a result of P-Funk's sonic, visual and psychological renditions of ancient Egypt, as well as the work of Sun Ra, my family, and idiosyncratic origin myths as a cosmology that acknowledged and privileged blackness. I'm interested in the hieroglyph's capacity for narrative as well as the engraving as a collective exercise of mark-making that we all can do.

PIETERSON Mark-making forms part of the basis for your participatory installation in South Central called *The Crenshaw District Hieroglyph Project*. What other ideas are you exploring with this project?

HALSEY *The Crenshaw District Hieroglyph Project* is a representational monument of community records that folk in the neighborhood will recognize as theirs, both through the images on the surface and the fact that we built it ourselves. I want to build architecture from our hands to empower us and hold our narratives, as we are being deleted and shuffled around. I've always felt that the built environment exists in dialogue with oppressive, or liberating, systems. Architecture and its materials can be exploitative or freeing. The policies, planning, and buildings themselves can serve the interests of their constituents by obliging certain implicit and explicit habits, affects, and economies. I've always had questions around who is building my neighborhood. Where is my autonomy within the process of designing, organizing, and building space that I must exist in? I feel now, and I felt even as a kid, the different power structures materialized in architectures in neighborhoods around LA.

PIETERSON How is the project coming along?

HALSEY This is my first public project. It's a permanent and complicated structure. I'm constantly in meetings with art fabricators, steel fabricators, designers, and architects for consultations. I'm constantly pitching and presenting the project in hopes to secure funding. I'm making the work during the day and attending community meetings at night. I've had to wear many hats. I'm looking forward to finding and securing the funding to hire a team so that I can work on the project full-time as an artist. In the meantime, I created a prototype that is on view in "Made In L.A."