

GAGOSIAN

Los Angeles Times

Lauren Halsey brings the funk to the L.A. art scene

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In her first year at the Los Angeles Center for Enriched Studies (LACES) in Faircrest Heights, Lauren Halsey distinctly remembers driving back home to South Central L.A. one afternoon in 1999 with her father, an accountant and avowed Funkateer, as he cued up Parliament Funkadelic's "Aqua Boogie (A Psychoalphadiscobetabioaquadoloop)" and, as Halsey recalls, "It just changed everything."

"It was a million shortcuts, my father does not take any main boulevards or avenues, he prides himself on being the "Thomas Guide" for Los Angeles—the human map—so driving from LACES or wherever back to South Central was always residential streets my entire life, the grand tour," says Halsey, who had heard the seven-minute hit single on P-Funk's seminal 1978 album "Motor Booty Affair" on more than one occasion. But on that day, despite the car sickness, the song offered some strange epiphanic salve. "Maybe I was quiet and we weren't talking or I was just open to what he was playing—he always played the same music—but for whatever reason, that day I was ready for 'Aqua Boogie.' It was a cartoon. This dream, liquid, black world, and it was just beautiful...dancing underwater and not getting your hair wet."

As a dappled smear of March sunshine bleeds through a mountain of storm clouds for the first day in weeks, Halsey sifts through the "archive" she's assembled over the past decade inside a makeshift studio carved out of a detached garage behind her Grandma Ida's home in South Central. Halsey, now 32, lived in a tiny bedroom built in the back of this cramped L-shaped workspace as a college student. And it was from this garage that she propelled her distinctively liquid Afro-futurist dreamscape into some of the top art schools (CalArts, Yale), galleries (David Kordansky, Charlie James, Jeffrey Deitch), institutions (The Studio Museum in Harlem, L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art and Hammer Museum, Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris) and collections in the international art world.

The success and reach of her funky operatic oeuvre is as much about form as it is content, perhaps because the inscrutability of Halsey's work is matched only by its universality and desirability. Her architectonic sculptural objects and environments merge hieroglyphs and rap lyrics, Home Depot materials and modernist (even fabulist) architecture, black space and museum space, with a seamless hand-built aesthetic that feels like P-Funk's sonic cosmology carved itself into the Temple of Dendur by way of South Central.

"It's a profound and inspiring experience, the way she's physicalizing relationships to her family and her community in sculptural and architectural form," says David Kordansky, who met Halsey when she was still an undergrad at CalArts and signed her to his blue-chip roster after seeing her solo show at MOCA and "The Crenshaw District Hieroglyph Project (Prototype

Architecture),” which was awarded the \$100,000 Mohn Award as the standout work of the Hammer Museum’s “Made In L.A.” biennial last year. Hewn from more than 600 bas-relief gypsum panels carved with street tags, bodybuilder silhouettes, Air Jordan logos, motherships, signage for black-and brown-owned business, pharaonic and vernacular black architecture, P-Funk and G-Funk icons, low-riders and high-top fades, the names of gun (and/or police) violence victims and moments of black excellence, the epic installation is meant to serve as a temple-sized template for a forthcoming permanent 3,000-plus panel monument in South Central. Complete with rain features and an oculus, the structure memorializes, historicizes and ultimately familiarizes the idiosyncrasies of the neighborhood and does so by incorporating these tropes into hand-carved panels that form the building blocks of an Egypto-modernist structure that may run in tandem with Destination Crenshaw, a historic 1.3-mile “public art and streetscape design” project scheduled to open in 2020. Though projects like this take years, once it’s finally complete, Halsey’s structure may very well set her on a career path on par with other international architecturally curious art stars Ai Weiwei, Theaster Gates or Christo. That is if she’s not on that path already.

“For me she’s like her generation’s Rachel Harrison, and Rachel Harrison was my generation’s Bruce Nauman, and that’s literally the lineage I see her in— Nauman, Harrison, Halsey,” says Helen Molesworth, who was chief curator at MOCA when she commissioned Halsey’s epic plaster grotto installation “we still here, there,” which took up an entire gallery at the museum’s Grand Avenue building last spring. The funkified Gesamtkunstwerk, which Times critic Christopher Knight compared to signature works by Mike Kelley and Mark Bradford— “Halsey’s deft installation blends delightful improv with eloquent formal rigor”—was made in modular sections in her grandmother’s backyard with the help of 20 friends and family members, who clipped CDs to create pearlescent grottoes with working waterfalls that were embellished with Colby posters found by Halsey touting black-owned businesses and dream-concert lineups, Black Panther rugs, braids of hair, Ghanaian kente cloth and African American figurines (of basketballers, ballerinas and jazz musicians) in a tropical dreamscape that Halsey says she “wanted to feel like what my [childhood] bedroom was like, this beautiful dream world.”

The title was sampled from Jerry’s Flying Fox, which posted a sign during the restaurant’s renovation that boldly declared: “We Are Still Here.” “I just loved that as a statement, just to underline our resistance,” says Halsey. “No matter how much we’re shuffled around or deleted from neighborhoods, we’re always here in this space. No matter where the there is.”

Her environments merge hieroglyphs and rap lyrics, Home Depot materials and modernist architecture.

On the heels of her 2018 domination of the L.A. art scene, Halsey has been in constant demand at panel talks, artist dinners and the gala circuit—sometimes as the guest of honor, sometimes as the star DJ—but she tries to limit her circulation as much as possible these days. “I kind of just stay out the way,” says Halsey in her somnambular sotto voce, which never boasts of any personal achievements, though they are growing by the week. “I’m with my friends every day, or I try to be. I’m not on Instagram, which makes me feel good. I’m not consuming anything. I was before, when no one knew my work existed, now it just feels weird a little bit.”

Despite the social-media blackout, Halsey’s signature style—with her gold-trim glasses and black baseball caps—has set her apart from her contemporaries: she’s instantly recognizable, instantly likeable and yet totally sphynx-like. On the March morning I visit her in South Central

she's wearing a white T-shirt, lug-soled work boots and multi-pocketed motorcycle pants. Her forearms are covered in black bracelets, her ears, nose and bottom lip adorned with golden jewelry. On rare occasions she'll sport a disco-ready afro, but on most days, including this one, Halsey keeps her locks braided and tucked under one of her black caps embroidered with "Los Angeles," which she buys by the half dozen at local swap meets or bodegas.

While there's an armature quality to these decidedly Angeleno ensembles, which often include LA-themed jerseys, they also incorporate what her friend Hammer curator Erin Christovale would call "the shine factor"—via reflective silver jackets or black patent-leather pants. The veneer pays homage to P-Funk while lending credence to this notion that Halsey is a once-in-a-generation artist in need of protection, as so many people interviewed for this article suggested. If she is in need of protection, it's likely a result of how visibly exhausted she seems of late: 18-to-20-hour work days have become the norm for the past couple years to keep up with the commercial, curatorial and critical demands on her work.

Whereas Lauren Halsey may have circulated as a well-kept secret in years past—a 2017 Kickstarter project allowed collectors to grab massive works relatively inexpensively to support the Hieroglyph project—now her name is on the radar of top curators, collectors and other artists across the globe, ones who breathlessly toss out exalted terms like special, pure, genius, even messiah, when describing her vision—monuments enshrining the harsh realities and beautiful fantasies of black life as it's lived and experienced every day from South Central to South Africa—which seems perfectly suited to this fraught moment in our history.

That history is collated like a living taxonomy throughout every layer of the Lauren Halsey archive. Tacked to the walls are flags (of the Black Business School and the Pan-American version of Old Glory, both of which are red, black and green) and posters for beauty salons, church services and the Venus & Serena Williams Tennis Academy. On the tables are stacks of packaged wigs and hair nets; carved and painted gypsum tiles (of golden boom boxes and teal Afro-futurist femme fatales from her first art classes at LACES); a handmade soul-food cookbook from a recently deceased neighbor; rows of mold-formed resin pyramid sculptures filled with clippings from the George Clinton-inspired hairdos she rocked years ago; and various architectural models, including one of a tiny house wrapped in Louis Vuitton print beside a vernacular cottage from the neighborhood.

"I see everything that I make as models for things looking forward," says Halsey, picking up the tiny logo-stamped home, which riffs on an LV-wrapped Buick that can often be seen cruising the streets of downtown L.A. "When I made that I imagined I would make this Louis Vuitton home next to this regular home and that would be some kind of cosmology I would create."

More cosmologies unfold across the floor, where porcelain cheetahs from her grandmother's collection stand watch over Halsey's foil-and-foam-core sculptural panels that echo the set designs from P-Funk concerts. The shelves are lined with bottles of exotic incenses and oils (think Royal Chill and Nose Candy), with gradient posters of Halsey's design asking: "Why Don't WE Own Businesses in the Hood?"

"The materiality of this practice, at once archaeological and otherworldly, is evocative and refreshing and pertinent," adds Kordansky. "I'm also drawn to way she takes the provincial, a very specific set of cultural references, and gives them a larger voice and a necessary, enduring presence. In some ways she's the unexpected heir to Mike Kelley."

Such rarefied air is not a place where terms like beautiful, funky and gorgeous—words Halsey repeatedly uses to describe various breakthrough moments in her stratospheric trajectory—are used by young emerging artists poised to be the new avant-gardists of the new establishment. Then again, most artists in that position aren't born and raised (and still living and working and seeking out moments of transcendence) in South Central Los Angeles. Most artists in that position aren't constantly worrying about the “architecture of oppression”; the looming threat of displacement, disempowerment and gentrification; friends and family members being murdered by gang—or random acts of—violence; or their own art being used as a tool, prop or worse to accelerate such displacement and disempowerment. Most artists in that position are less concerned about selling out than getting out of a precarious home environment. And most artists in that position—especially those ascendant thirtysomethings—aren't typically burdened by the responsibility of their work speaking for and about their communities to a global audience. Then again, most artists aren't Lauren Halsey.

“The stakes in Lauren's work are high, and she's not using art to get out of the hood, it's not a vehicle for class mobility for her, it's real,” says Molesworth. “Lauren has never asked for approval, and that's the power of her work,” adds Erin Christovale, who co-curated last year's “Made in L.A.” biennial at the Hammer. “She's this pure person who has stuck to the aesthetics and ideals that her work is about, and I think that's super rare.”

Long before Christovale was a curator at the Hammer she was working on a fashion project called the Coven, and it was during that period that she first met Halsey, who was studying art and architecture at El Camino College. Their paths crossed at a fashion pop-up where Christovale was selling her holographic jewelry. “I remember thinking, ‘This person is so dope,’” she says. “She had all these neon bracelets that said “Parliament” all over them up her arm, and she was really into the holograms and bought a few. We hung out a few times after that, then I didn't see her for a few years until a mutual friend exhibited her incense collection as an artwork. It was about the names of these incenses, like Obama Magic or Oprah's Money, and for her, part of her practice is about showing the brilliance of the black community in L.A. I was totally struck by it: this conceptual gesture hinting at a collective brilliance.”

For Halsey, the raw material of any such collective brilliance was triggered in many ways by her formative years, especially in her bedroom (aka “the kick-it spot for everyone on my street”) or riding in cars with her father, cousins or grandmother. “Always being a passenger my entire life,” says Halsey, raised her awareness of the material and structural disparities between her school environment—from the Montessori grade school she attended in Westchester to her days at CalArts in Valencia—and that of her own neighborhood.

“I always knew what it meant to be driving back home to South Central and entering the neighborhood and what those visual cues were, what the materials started to look like, what the signs started to look like, what cladding on buildings looked like as opposed to the buildings in Santa Monica or Studio City or the hills,” says Halsey, fidgeting with the two gold Nefertiti studs facing off against each other in her right earlobe. “It was very aggressive stuff—the handmade signage, the rules for going into a mini market that criminalize me and I'm not even a criminal. “No Drugs. No Drug Dealing. No Washing Your Car on the Premises.” All these threats just to go buy a piece of candy. Never would I see that on Melrose or at the Grove, where I would go every Friday after school to hang out. So I always felt shitty and disempowered. But hanging out with my friends and the way we took up space in our neighborhood— we were always on the

bike, always on the street—I would find all these moments of beauty, and those would butt up against all the other aggressive architectural stuff. It wasn't ever, I hate being here, I hate living here. It was more like, Who is making these decisions?"

One day very soon the answer to that question may well be Lauren Halsey, but art-world stardom was probably the furthest thing from her mind growing up in South Central. With a preschool teacher for a mother, Halsey and her brother had all kinds of art materials as kids, but her childhood dream, she says, "was to get recruited by Pat Summitt," referring to the legendary coach of the University of Tennessee Lady Vols basketball team. (Her cousin, Arron Afflalo, is the journeyman NBA player for teams like the New York Knicks and Sacramento Kings.) Throughout high school, she adds, "I was put in an amazing situation when I was playing elite-level basketball."

A scandal involving the basketball coach and a player in a club league caused the team to be disbanded, however, and Halsey was left searching for "something expressive, because basketball had been my art for my entire life," she says of her decision to enroll in art classes. "I got really lucky because I had this amazing teacher, Louie Bruce, and he was just a magnet for me, so much so that I would spend my lunch hanging out with him listening to his Eddie Murphy impressions." The second assignment was carving the same gypsum panels she uses today.

"I just liked the intensity of committing to a line," says Halsey, tracing the grooves of an early carving atop a table in the garage. "And then I grew up with my father riffing off of ancient Egypt all the time, stuff about bloodline and fantasies of origin like Afro-futurist stuff I didn't even know yet."

What she did know was that by the time she graduated from LACES, the prep academy once attended by Leonardo DiCaprio, she didn't want to try to figure out the direction of her life while paying university tuition, so she decided to take a wide range of classes—in sculpture, printmaking, bronze casting and digital photography—at El Camino community college. "I just wanted to continue to follow this feeling I would get in my heart when I was carving," says Halsey. "I didn't know I would use the ethics and codes of P-funk into art and-space-making, I just knew it was in my heart, I'm a Funkateer. I had no idea it would turn into a whole art practice where I was trying to funkitize L.A., as George says, 'To save a dying world from its funklessness.'"

At the time Halsey was still living at her parents' house, where she transformed her room into an early prototype of one of her environmental installations. "Everything was a vibe," says Emmanuel Carter, a friend of Halsey's for more than two decades, about those early artistic collaborations in the artist's grotto-esque bedroom. These days Carter is the lead assistant on all Lauren Halsey projects, and this afternoon he and the artist's longtime girlfriend Monique McWilliams, a fashion stylist who doubles as Halsey's project manager, are in the process of helping her transfer the archive to her first proper studio in a former beauty supply shop in South Central.

Halsey argues that because her parents let her have free reign as a child and because she was the first person on her block to have an iMac, friends like Carter were always in her room writing rap lyrics and recording them over beats while she made collages. One wall was filled with cut-outs from old issues of Vibe magazine, while another—coated with chalkboard paint—was constantly being tagged. The space was illuminated with party lights in all different hues. "I

remember when I put the foil on the walls my dad was like, ‘What’s wrong with you?’” recalls Halsey. “But it was Parliament Funkadelic, it was shiny, it was from outer space. I remember at one point I had a park bench in there.”

“I remember that park bench,” says Carter with a laugh. In many ways Halsey’s group-fueled practice—one that enlists friends and family like Carter, McWilliams and her cousins or grandmother as collaborators/fabricators—started in that bedroom.

Halsey also got some early encouragement from her aunt, the former Times staff writer Jocelyn Y. Stewart, who enlisted her niece to make sets for the plays she penned for a church Grandma Ida helped build. Stewart introduced Halsey to Angeleno artist Dominique Moody, who suggested she study architecture. What began with elevations and blueprints at El Camino graduated into complicated computer renderings during a year-long odyssey at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco.

“What I loved was drafting by hand, it was the best thing ever, and then once I transferred to CCA it was the total opposite,” says Halsey, who took early inspiration from Archigram and “The Continuous Monument,” Superstudio’s speculative drawings of a white gridded utopian monolith intended to bring “cosmic order on earth.” Though she got a chance to create her own “wonder worlds” in “crazy wild rendering programs,” it became very obvious very quickly that these proposals could never exist in a place like South Central because they “would just be about form, never about class and race or the way cities and neighborhoods work for real people,” she says, adding: “The experience was beautiful, but I didn’t feel full.”

After transferring back to El Camino, her community college mentor Paul Gellman prodded Halsey to apply to CalArts, which she did. To her own surprise, she was accepted. “When I got there it was just culture shock,” says Halsey, who would beg her cousin to pick her up so she could go home—45 miles from Valencia to South Central—as much as possible throughout the week. “I had never been in a space like that. It was too much freedom. The first day I was there with my dad and my brother—and this is relative and not radical, but at the moment it felt crazy—the Gamelan Band was walking around naked. My dad was like, ‘This is the school you signed up for?’ I didn’t even know what an art school was, but after a while it became really beautiful.”

Despite this new offering of beautiful moments, Halsey was back home every weekend. On Mondays her aunt or grandmother would drive her to McDonald’s for coffee and hash browns at 6:30 AM, then make the trek to Valencia in time for Michael Ned Holte’s art history class at 9:30. “I was supposed to stay there all week, but I couldn’t, I just couldn’t, so I would come home and then take the bus back and make these drawings,” says Halsey, who set about archiving the neighborhood over the ensuing two years. “All the nuances would just get marked in the drawing—there’s a new gang tag; oh, they painted over it; oh, they got a new sign or new vendors. I would stop once it wasn’t South Central anymore because it wasn’t interesting to me.”

In addition to the drawings, which were layered on newsprint and might now be considered two-dimensional studies for the carved panels, Halsey began remapping the neighborhood with fictional blueprints for blocks that didn’t exist: think the South Central Sphinx, which she recently acquired, next door to her favorite swap meet next door to her favorite vendor, with gang tags in the color of her choosing.

At CalArts Halsey also began incorporating her friends and family into her work. She would take her cousin's digital camera after she went out to parties—"I don't think she even knows this now," laughs Halsey—and upload all of the photos of her cousin's friends into her archives. Later she staged photos with Carter and others acting as if they were jumping into cars, walking up a pyramid or dribbling a basketball, "just to get the motion," she says.

An early fan of her work was Naima J. Keith, the newly appointed vice president of education and public programs at LACMA, who first met Halsey on a tour of her studio at CalArts while doing research for a survey show at the Studio Museum of Harlem. "We went to meet with the graduate students, but Charles Gaines said we should also meet with Lauren," says Keith. "She was super cool, calm and collected and nervous on the inside, which she told us later. But the clarity about what she wanted to do and how she wanted her practice to function was apparent even back then, how she wanted to integrate the eclectic parts and characters of the community into her work. She was just gathering all these stories."

As she neared graduation, a professor suggested she apply to Yale's MFA program, and she surprised herself again by getting accepted with her blueprints and drawings. In New Haven she turned her studio into a precursor to her plaster and burlap grotto forms, which later materialized in a residency project, "Kingdom Splurge," at Recess in New York, catching the eye of Molesworth. "She was building the piece in the space, and even though the space was small, the ambition for the work was enormous," recalls Molesworth. "I was drawn to a lot of the formal elements and the labor involved in making handmade architecture out of these impoverished materials. It seemed interesting to me that this young black lesbian was making a fantasmatic space where you could tell secrets, steal a kiss."

"The Kingdom Splurge" series began at Yale and continued after Halsey completed her MFA and earned a spot in the Studio Museum's 2015 residency program, an early incubator for art stars like Njideka Akunyili Crosby and Kehinde Wiley. In many ways "Kingdom Splurge" served as a formalized proof-of-concept test for Halsey's earliest artistic ventures—from her bedroom installations and her LACES carving to her neighborhood archiving at CalArts.

"So much of what is at the core of the hieroglyphs and 'Kingdom Splurge' is archiving and creating a space that projects our fantasies alongside history and our everyday," says painter Andy Robert, who was a classmate of Halsey's at CalArts and took part in the 2016 residency program at the Studio Museum. It was in Harlem where Halsey returned to her first material obsession, the gypsum panel, after watching T-shirt vendors—or as she describes them, "legit pyramid builders/designers/makers in various black alternative theological groups"—out of her studio window as they built human-scale pyramids with Home Depot materials on 125th Street next to their sales tables.

"All of these people were engaging their fantasies of Egypt in a way that my father wasn't," says Halsey. "His is a headspace, a heart space. They were doing that on top of a very physical response."

During that period Halsey was also spending a lot of time at the Metropolitan Museum of Art while listening to Sun Ra and P-Funk inside the Temple of Dendur. "That would free me up where it wasn't about the weight of anything, it was about infinity. So when I'd walk into the Met I'd first listen to 'Mothership Connection' and George singing we've returned to reclaim the pyramids and it just was like, Okay, now I'm in my fantasy place," says Halsey. After returning

home from New York, Halsey built a float for the Los Angeles Kingdom Day Parade, the country's largest MLK parade, which began her team-based process in earnest. She enlisted her grandmother and 20 other friends and family members to recreate signs, businesses and landmarks from the neighborhood for an installation on a 50-foot flatbed. Christovale and Robert helped build (and ride) on the float down Martin Luther King, Jr., Boulevard.

Halsey argues that energy is “impossible to replicate with small stand-alone works,” which is why she'd much rather concern herself with building “a park that included temporary showers and housing” rather than the discrete sculptural objects and immersive environments that have turned her into a darling of the international art market. Despite that revelation, Kordansky argues, “The gallery will be instrumental in helping Lauren amplify her vision, connecting her ideas—and her objects—with global audiences. It's about distribution and building networks, infrastructure and support. It's also about contextualizing her work within art history and social history. We want to be a catalyst. The possibilities are limitless.”

That limitlessness will likely be tested once Halsey returns from Paris, where she spent “three intense weeks” this spring installing her first international solo show at Fondation Louis Vuitton. To start the “sampling process,” a Parisian friend took Halsey on a tour of all the shops and neighborhoods of black Paris, where she spent a few days buying things and talking to folks, to accumulate an archive from the French version of the swap meet and 99 Cent stores. Halsey was eager to appropriate those items and juxtapose them with one of her “funk mounds,” smaller versions of the MOCA installation, which debuted last December to great fanfare at Art Basel Miami Beach.

“I truly believe, as all black people do or should, that blackness is universal and homogeneous, so I'm interested in my practice existing in the scale of the diaspora and making connections with Los Angeles to Harlem to Miami to Paris,” says Halsey. “From there I don't know what the results will be, but if I can sustain this practice for the rest of my life, I'll have all of these living archives.”

Après Paris, Halsey will also have the opportunity, at least for the next six years of her new lease, to build that archive in her first dedicated studio. The artist spent the better part of March with Carter and McWilliams moving her archive from her grandmother's garage—in the past year she's also worked out of makeshift studios at the downtown art-handling facility Art Movement Los Angeles and the penthouse of the Los Angeles Athletic Club—to this new 6,000-square-foot beauty supply shop space in South Central, which she plans to equip with an outdoor garden, basketball court, ping pong table and bonfire pit for her friends.

“Now that we have a place that will be our place, there's room for experimentation, so I'm super excited to be able to commit to new materials, new ideas, new processes, without having to move out in a month, find the next space and rebuild this energy,” says Halsey. “There will be room for other beautiful moments that we haven't experienced yet.”

One of those moments may be the opportunity to design a stage for Dr. Funkenstein himself, George Clinton, who came to the Hammer with Red Hot Chili Peppers bassist Flea during the “Made in L.A.” show. After touring him through the installation—“I was just pointing out things like, ‘Check that out, it's the cro-nasal sapien.’ And he was just like, ‘Shit! What?’”—Clinton invited Halsey to watch him play a gig last spring and agreed to collaborate with her on a

“funkatized” stage, perhaps for his final concert, which may well go down in the history books as “another vessel in the cosmology.”

“I think she’s so pure to the point that I think her head is big steps ahead of her skills, and I don’t mean skills in the sense of drawing or sculpting or painting but in the ability to execute,” says L.A.-based architect Kulapat Yantrasast, who has consulted with Halsey about how she might best manage the workflow and materiality of the South Central monument from an artistic and architectural perspective. “She needs a team who can bring her ideas to fruition,” adds Yantrasast. “Because it’s impossible for her to have her hands in everything.”

Before she met with Yantrasast, Halsey was convinced she alone could carve the thousands of tiles that would go into the Hieroglyph Project, which may take on a new title upon completion, but after doing the calculations based on the Hammer installation timeline, she realized the carving alone would have taken years. That is to say nothing of construction and the extra time it would take to carve into a material that was resistant to the elements and approved for public art and architecture. Halsey, for her part, has (sort of) resigned herself to this reality. She’s now excited to invite members of the South Central community to carve parts of GFRC (glass fiber reinforced concrete) panels, the same used on the facade of the Broad museum.

“What’s important about the project is that for the first time I’m not the only one authoring the messaging, and so it will be a collaboration with the neighborhood,” says Halsey. “There are very vulnerable business practices in the neighborhood, and I have dreams of programming it in a way that’s transcendent, but all this stuff costs money.”

“Blackness is universal, so I’m interested in making connections with Los Angeles to Harlem to Miami to Paris.”

— **Lauren Halsey**

The grim reality is that while Halsey’s project, just like Destination Crenshaw, are community-facing celebrations of the black community, for the black community and by the black community, they may well serve as memorials to a neighborhood—which is constantly fighting back against gentrification—that is no longer inhabited by that community.

“It’s my nightmare,” says Halsey. “I think about it every day and about making projects that somehow aren’t the seed or accelerator for displacement. The train is coming, stadiums are here, the destiny is written. I think Destination Crenshaw can only be successful if it transcends being a beautification project. In my dream world the project would allow local business owners to use these city-owned buildings that are vacant so it’s about sustaining new and old economy and not just about a new mural and a new structure. It’s about dollars in a very tangible way.”

Another artist who shared this goal, who remained in South Central—despite his ability to leave for a “better life” somewhere else—was the late Grammy-nominated rapper, producer and community activist Nipsey Hussle, the founding creator of Destination Crenshaw, who feverishly worked to “buy back the hood” to prevent against the creep of gentrification. Hussle was shot to death outside his clothing boutique, Marathon Clothing, two days after he and Halsey completed an interview for the Hammer Museum catalogue about her “Made in L.A.” project. After Hussle’s death, councilman Marqueece Harris-Dawson released a statement that said: “Hussle had a vision of a neighborhood built for and by the sons and daughters of South L.A.

During his life, he moved from shadows into the bright hope of freedom and community revitalization.”

That may as well be a statement about Lauren Halsey, who like Hussle also intends to stay in South Central and help evolve the grimmer realities of the neighborhood into funkified fantasies. In a short but poignant email from Paris, Halsey noted that Hussle—to whom she dedicated a pair of carved columns she made for her Frieze Award exhibition display at the New York art fair in May—was one of her biggest inspirations in terms of black wealth building, black labor, neighborhood pride and “being a true participant in tha hood,” she wrote. “I can go on ‘n on. I framed my entire proposal for “The Crenshaw District Hieroglyph Project” around collaborating with him and his strip mall as a metaphor for designing and building black space/fubu architecture just like he did. I feel robbed. South Central feels robbed. No words can ever explain what we lost and folks outside of South Central will never really understand the weight of who/what we lost. I don’t know though. He’d say: ‘The marathon continues.’”