

GAGOSIAN



## Lauren Halsey Introduces the Elite Art World to South Central LA

*The red-hot 36-year-old artist has achieved global success with a very local approach: applying imaginative, laserlike focus to a few square blocks of her hometown. In doing so, she renders and reflects what it's actually like to live and work in—and never, ever leave—South Central Los Angeles.*

Jasmine Sanders



**Entering** Lauren Halsey's studio, which sits on a low-key corner in South Central LA, there is the feeling that the quasi-industrial space has been subsumed by Halsey's creations. The studio does not merely house art, but has become art. On the unsurprisingly sunny Saturday when I visit, the layout bursts and gleams, in contrast to the concrete surroundings outside. On broad tables, palm trees made of acrylic, resin, and feathers loom over glittered, wood-mounted cutouts of Halsey's heroes, who often happen to be local heroes. The scene has come alive, bustling with body builders, members of Halsey's family, and celebrities like the rapper MC Eiht, whom I recognize from *Menace II Society*. Everyday denizens commingle with the well-known, imparting not just an image, but the texture and intimate thrills of Cali life.

Halsey is inconspicuously dressed in a hoodie and sneakers, and discusses her practice with nonplussed clarity of vision and purpose. Her voice is smooth, lilting: "The work will reference

South Central, as it always does,” she tells me. “What I love about these is I can really get into a hyper--specificity. Down to, like, my cousin’s car or the doughnut shop on the corner.” Halsey turns and points to those figures, which will later be rendered into massive murals with a combination of spray paint graffiti and photography. They seem to preside over the whole scene, contributing to the sense that the work is in memory and recognition of those who are dead yet remain present. Halsey’s partner, nearby, spatters glitter onto a photograph.



From the particularity of her experiences, memories, people, and places, Halsey’s interpretations take flight, and the result is a kind of urbane fantasia: the magical land of Oz meets South Central. Halsey tells me that she is attempting to “summon a world” suffused with “an ethos of funk.” The Technicolor palette is inspired by settings as varied as Day-Glo signage or her grandmother’s living room couch. Color is a locale and a mood. She points to a photograph of a stylish woman with an impossibly sculptured updo: “Her hair may not have been *that* neon.” Within fine art, certain materials, such as cardboard, cork, plastics, glitter, or home photography, are often dismissed. Halsey’s enthralling recombinations testify to the alchemical wonder of the mundane.

Halsey, 36, has lived and worked in the neighborhood her whole life. Her family has been here since the 1920s, and it’s clear that her roles as artist and politically engaged community member are not divisible. During the pandemic, Halsey turned the community center she was developing nearby into a distribution center for organic-produce boxes. She absorbs the details of her neighborhood, remixes its images and feelings, and reflects those familiar sights, sounds, and people back to the community through artistic and architectural works. It is, in this way, a local practice meant for a local audience. But in recent years, as her star has risen in the art world, that hyperlocal vision has been exported all over the world.



*Lauren Halsey black history wall of respect (II), 2021 Vinyl, acrylic, and mirror on wood, © Lauren Halsey Photo: Rob McKeever, Courtesy of the artist, David Kordansky Gallery, and Gagosian.*

Halsey has nonetheless managed to preserve the integrity (and locality) of her art. Take the Met's Roof Garden commission in New York, completed last year. Halsey designed a 22-foot-high open-air structure on the roof of the most famous collection of art in America, echoing aspects of the Egyptian Temple of Dendur found on the first floor of the museum. On the surfaces of her structures, Halsey carved hieroglyphs featuring images, phrases, and portraits of artists and friends from the neighborhood. Her family members, rendered as sphinxes, guarded the entrances. The work will ultimately be reassembled in South Central as a long-term installation. But, as will be the case with much of the work she's showing at her first Venice Biennale this spring and at other gallery shows in Europe this year, the monumental vision traveled elsewhere first before returning home.

"The way that she thinks about her project is with such ambition—it's both a sculptural project and an archival project," says curator Antwaun Sargent, who featured Halsey in a massive group show of Black artists at Gagosian in the summer of 2021. The two met a decade ago while Halsey was a grad student at Yale. Last fall, Sargent, who is now a director at Gagosian, signed Halsey to the gallery's roster. (Bringing her aboard was a "no-brainer," he says.) As Sargent sees it, Halsey employs her early education in architecture as a means of representing and preserving Black subjectivity—including her own. "We see what corner store she visited, the papier-mâché sphinx her neighbor once made and displayed on his front lawn for years," Sargent says. "They're these beautiful moments of remembrance, which is itself an art form, but one that the city will come and paint over under the guise of beautification. But Lauren insists that this *is* beauty, and via her landscapes we can show that we were here—that we're still here."



*Lauren Halsey the eastside of south central los angeles hieroglyph prototype architecture (I), 2022 Glass fiber reinforced concrete and mixed media. Installation view of “The Roof Garden Commission: Lauren Halsey, the eastside of south central los angeles hieroglyph prototype architecture (I), 2022”, April 18–October 22, 2023, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. © Lauren Halsey Photo: Hyla Skopitz and Erica Allen. Courtesy the artist, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, David Kordansky Gallery, and Gagosian*

The studio space seems to refute stasis; Halsey ushers me around various tables. A rendering of another Halsey cousin entices the viewer from atop a chestnut horse. As with most of the depicted subjects, she stares into the camera, returning the viewer’s gaze. I ask whether I am allowed to touch the art, to which Halsey says, “Of course!” This invitation for tactility and a deeper, more personal experience of the objects reminds that they are inspired by, and in some cases gleaned directly from, the first museums many of us encounter: Black homes.

After a brief trip to the corner taco truck, we return to the studio. I notice a cutout featuring a sign that reads “Latasha Harlins Playground”—a local park named for the 15-year-old girl whose death at the hands of a Korean American store owner contributed to the 1992 uprisings in Los Angeles. Nearby is an image of Tom Liquor Mart, the shop at the intersection of Florence and Normandie that was set aflame and served as the flash point of the rebellion that spring. Halsey was just five years old. The legacy of the rebellion—called the “LA riots” in the national media—reverberates throughout the city to this day and is infused in Halsey’s work. But not in an abstract historical or political way. Rather, some of the most famous sites of the rebellion are eulogized warmly, fondly, by Halsey. They were, after all, just ordinary sites from her childhood—sites of joy.



