

# History in the Making

*With a sprawling installation on the rooftop of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the artist Lauren Halsey gives South Central L.A. culture the pharaonic treatment. By Michael Slenske*

*Photographed by Paul Mpagi Sepuya  
Styled by Monique McWilliams*

When the mixed-media artist Lauren Halsey was growing up in South Central Los Angeles, her parents would invite friends and family over to watch football games and fight nights. Halsey, now 35, vividly recalls eating a slice of Jino's Pizza when Mike Tyson bit a chunk out of Evander Holyfield's ear. Those evenings, however, went far beyond the sporting action. They provided a space for her accountant father to engage in teachable moments about Black history and identity.

"In a very serious and rigorous way, my father studied aspects of pharaonic architecture and dynasties that he would just freestyle to my brother and me," says Halsey, as she huddles for warmth on a rain-drenched January afternoon, seated behind the illuminated Lucite desk at her studio in South Central Los Angeles. She explains that he would take time during the breaks of Raiders games to "do the Lorraine O'Grady thing," referring to the octogenarian artist-critic whose "Miscegenated Family Album" features diptych photographs making comparisons between her family members and Egyptian royalty. Halsey's father would trot out a picture of a pharaoh or an Egyptian queen beside one of, say, NBA Hall of Famer Scottie Pippen. "He'd be like, 'This is your bloodline. This is who you are. This is where you're from.' And then he would go back to the game," Halsey says, then laughs. "So that became an interest of mine, spinning myself into some sort of context of royalty as an armor to exist in the world and navigate all this mess."

Over the next two decades, Halsey internalized those lessons and filtered them through conceptual sculptures that she developed at the Los Angeles Center for Enriched Studies, where she first learned to carve bas-relief into gypsum tiles with flathead screwdrivers and chisels. Using imagery from her neighborhood, Halsey created her own Egypto-modernist hieroglyphs that monumentalized the Black experience of L.A.'s Crenshaw District. She continued this practice at the California Institute of the Arts, at the Yale School of Art, and with a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Since then, she has emerged as a once-in-a-generation artist—one who is piloting a rocket-fueled career.

In the past five years, her work has been the subject of solo shows at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and

the Fondation Louis Vuitton, in Paris. At the Hammer Museum's "Made in L.A. 2018" biennial, she occupied the entirety of the building's Lindbrook Terrace with *The Crenshaw District Hieroglyph Project (Prototype Architecture)*, a pharaonic temple pavilion that featured more than 600 hand-carved tiles with images of Black icons, businesses, and memorials to victims of violence. The sculpture was the talk of the show, and by popular vote it was awarded the biennial's \$100,000 Mohn Award.

"I think what's incredible about her work is that it has always had different layers," says Erin Christovale, the Hammer Museum curator who cocurated "Made in L.A. 2018." "There are layers for the people who know what those symbols are and who frequent those businesses and organizations, for people who are part of the African diaspora globally, and then on a more formal level, there are these architectural implications."

This spring, the artist will unveil her most ambitious project to date, *the eastside of south central los angeles hieroglyph prototype architecture (I)*, a site-specific commission that will alight on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Roof Garden on April 18. Composed of more than 750 glass-fiber-reinforced concrete tiles, Halsey's four-walled structure rises 22 feet in the air and will be visible from Central Park benches and Fifth Avenue penthouses. The structure sits on a 2,500-square-foot floor surrounded by decorative tiles evoking the Greek key motif; it is guarded by four sphinx sculptures, their heads carved with the faces of the artist's longtime girlfriend, Monique McWilliams; her brother, Dominic; her cousin Aujane; and her mother, Glenda, a preschool teacher who supplied Halsey with her first art materials. Four columns—topped with carved portraits of friends, family members, and one of Halsey's favorite South Central artists, Pasacio—are inspired by the Temple of Hathor in Dendera, Egypt, a country she hopes to visit one day.

Abraham Thomas, the new curator of architecture and design at the Met, who worked with Halsey on the commission, feels it is paradigm shifting. "It's hard to think of someone who's been really thinking on this scale, so holistically, in the way that Lauren does," he says.

One wall of the installation, devoted to text, begins with *WAZ UP!* and *KENFOLKS*—nods to a local "some of

everything" neighborhood store and a Watts-based car club—and ends with the words *AUTONOMY, SOLIDARITY, IMAGINE THAT, ALL THAT, and LEGACY*. "I wanted it to be legible from various sight lines," Halsey says. Other sides of the pavilion are covered with barbershop imagery depicting fades with phrases like *IN GOD'S HANDS, SWAG, and L.A. shaved into the backs of various heads*. "My father also cut hair," explains Halsey. "It always sort of seduced me to watch the precision and the font styles." There are also images of planets, weight lifters with muscles cut like gemstones, DJs, homes from her neighborhood, Egyptian queens, sphinxes, and signs for *SONS OF WATTS, SLAUSON TEES, and THE BOSSI GAL WIG ACADEMY*.

"She will carve into stone something that comes from an object or a statement from the neighborhood, but because it's passing through this form that we identify with ancient art, it takes on this metaphorical power," says the artist Charles Gaines, who served as Halsey's undergraduate professor at CalArts. "It's how those ideas are represented through these materials that's so ingenious and unique." Gaines compares Halsey's intervention atop the Met to Duke Ellington's debut at Carnegie Hall in 1943. It's an act of "equalizing the space by trying to undermine the hierarchy and, at the same time, expanding the language of culture in a very legitimate way," he says. "I personally think this is just gonna blow people's minds."

Halsey has also blown people's minds with gradient wall works made with strands of synthetic hair that cascade like rainbow-colored waterfalls; collaged watercolor totems celebrating icons of Black music; and plaster grotto "funk mounds" festooned with dioramic vignettes featuring Black figurines, fake plants, and reflective surfaces crafted from compact discs. All these were on display last spring, when her dealer, David Kordansky, christened his first New York location with the artist's second solo exhibition for the gallery. The show also featured a room-size mixed-media installation, *My Hope*, depicting a miniature world filled with tiny toy lowriders, trophy palm trees, and signage from all manner of South Central businesses, some proclaiming *REPARATIONS NOW! OF GOD BLESS US!*

A big source of inspiration for Halsey's visual language is George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic,

*This page: The artist Lauren Halsey, seated on one of the four sphinxes that are part of her latest work, the eastside of south central los angeles hieroglyph prototype architecture (I), 2022, a site-specific commission for the Met in New York. Halsey wears her own clothing and accessories (throughout).*







This page: Halsey's *Untitled*, 2022. Opposite: A wall of the eastside of south central los angeles hieroglyph prototype architecture (1), flanked by columns bearing carved portraits of friends and family members.

the groundbreaking funk music collective also known as P-Funk. Clinton founded the group in the late 1960s, and in the decades since, it has spawned numerous offshoots and inspired countless artists and musicians. The sci-fi "Mothership" Clinton would descend from during his stage shows is now in the Smithsonian.

"By middle school, I had committed myself to the funk, but I knew my contribution to P-Funk could never be its musicality," says Halsey, who became a fanatical Funkteer as a teenager. She loved P-Funk's expressions of Afrofuturism, the aesthetic movement that uses art, science fiction, and techno culture to project a better, freer future for people of the African diaspora. Halsey's love for Clinton's brand of Afrofuturist funk was so strong that as a teenager she plotted a path to become an auxiliary member of his band.

"I wondered, Who is this straight dude queering himself? The platforms, the glitter, the hair, the wedding dress," says Halsey, who was forming her own identity as a queer Black woman at the time. Back then she was making crude collages in Microsoft Paint of fantasy architecture she wanted to see in her neighborhood, and helping her aunt make stage sets for their church. "I thought, If I could make it into this collective, my output would be sculpture."

She got the opportunity to meet Clinton when the Red Hot Chili Peppers bassist, Flea, brought the 80-something funk icon to Halsey's Hammer show. Clinton was "blown away" by the detail of the work and the references to his band's 1980 *Trombipulation* album, which explores space travel, temple building, and a "Cro-Nasal Sapien" with an elephant trunk for faking the funk. "She's a conductor, a visionary, and she gets it done on that big scale," says Clinton, who now considers Halsey part of the collective. "She told me she wanted to design a stage for Coachella!"

Halsey's studio is a former beauty supply store. It is now overflowing with tables piled with figurines depicting Black churchgoers and performers, pyramids in the colors of the Pan-African flag, and other ephemera. "This is just a fraction of the archive," says Halsey. T-shirts memorializing the late rapper and Crenshaw-based entrepreneur Nipsey Hussle hang off works in progress; whole walls are filled with incense sticks evoking the





Halsey posing with the in-progress installation.



This page, clockwise from left: My Hope, 2022; *Sio But We Sho* (Dedicated to the Black Owned Beauty Supply Association) II, 2020; black history wall of respect (II), 2021.



HAIR AND MAKEUP BY EILEEN MADRID; FURNITURE PRODUCTS, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: ANDY FLOWER; COURTESY OF DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY; ELON SCHREINER; DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY; © LAUREN HALSEY; ROBB WICKEVER; COURTESY OF GAGOSIAN AND DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

scents of everything from money to Michelle Obama. Some of Halsey's most prized possessions include the South Central Sphinx, a car-size papier-mâché folk art sculpture that once resided on a neighborhood lawn. There's also a trio of painted aluminum spacecraft sourced from the same "mothership dealer" that works with George Clinton.

Halsey installed similar motherships over a stage she created for Clinton's first art exhibition in L.A. this winter at Jeffrey Deitch's Los Angeles gallery. The spray-painted mound form was embellished with busts of singers sporting afros, a rainbow-hued skirt hewn from synthetic hair, a throne of collaged CDs, and graffiti tags referencing a deep history of archetypes in the P-Funk cosmology. While the Met project required Halsey and her studio manager, Amanda McGough, to oversee an architecture team of 20 to 30 people over the past two years, Clinton's project kept her up at night. "It was a different type of pressure, because it was for Dr. Funkenstein himself," she recalls. "I was like, 'He has to affirm it, and if he doesn't, I'm the antithesis of funk.'" When Clinton first saw the stage, two days before the opening, he gasped and said, "Oh, shit!"

Before Christmas, Halsey hosted an aspirational preview of the Met commission for a who's who of L.A. art world machers, including the directors of every

major museum in the city. Halsey was being her "funky self," sporting cinnamon-colored jeans screened with portraits of female luminaries like Lauryn Hill, Cicely Tyson, and Chaka Khan made by the New York artist Aya Brown; metal-toe cowboy boots; and knockoff Versace sunglasses with fuchsia lenses. A couple of days later, wearing her usual uniform of sweats and an L.A. baseball cap, she was thinking about the Met installation's return to South Central, hopefully as a permanent sculpture on a neighboring lot.

"That's the real test," she said. "What happens when you put this sort of reference of temple architecture that represents a South Central-Watts aesthetic and bring it to that community?" The irony is that her structure may well outlive the gentrifying neighborhoods it depicts. Presented with this notion, she recalls the words of Douglas Kearney, a mentor at CalArts, who told her, "We're not making memorials; we're making monuments." Part preservationist, part Afrofuturist, Halsey's sculpture process archives her legacy—just as the Egyptians did in their temples—but also paves a path forward for her people. "The neighborhood is changing. I see it every day, but there's this insistence of 'We are still here,'" says Halsey. "There are also so many aspirational images that are future-based in those compositions, an assertion of space now and a hundred years from now."

At the outset of the pandemic, Halsey oversaw a food distribution effort through Summaeverything Community Center, the nonprofit organization that she founded in 2020. Over an 18-month period, Summaeverything donated more than 25,000 boxes of organic produce sourced from the Santa Monica Farmers Market, and hundreds of art kits from Crenshaw Dairy Mart and LACMA, to folks facing food insecurity and a lack of extracurricular activities for their children. Soon, Halsey will celebrate the expansion of Summaeverything with a 4,000-square-foot space that will be geared toward intellectual support and after-school programs. The center will offer tutoring and enrichment opportunities to local students, grades 6–12, who could conceivably collaborate with Halsey on future art projects—provided they finish their homework first.

"This is the most important work. This is the work I want to be doing," says Halsey. Aside from that, she is relishing the idea of collaborating with George Clinton in a personal way. She remembers how she built a float for the Kingdom Day Parade seven years ago in her parents' backyard with two dozen friends and family members. "That was the best experience ever," she says, her eyes aglow at the memory. After years of relentless museum and gallery deadlines, she admits, "I want to bring that energy back to my practice." ♦