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ARTFORUM


View of "Lauren Halsey," 2020.

# Lauren Halsey

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

Stepping into Lauren Halsey's latest installation was akin to entering a three-dimensional *mise en abyme*. The wall-to-wall phantasmagoria—built primarily out of modules of large stacked cubes that were part mirror, part painted sign, part color field—seemed to be constantly in motion as the silver floors, mirrored reflections, and overhead lights animated the images and hues into a kaleidoscopic collage of sculptural media. The experience of moving deeper into the space, through the snaking aisles, was overwhelming, but mesmerizingly so.

Halsey's subject matter is South Central Los Angeles, often the signs on the street: business markers, WE BUY HOUSES advertisements, and community center placards—some readymades, most rendered in paint. Her stacked-cube sculptures each conjure a city block at a moment in time. In one stack, a painted sign referencing the 1960s-era Sons of Watts Community Patrol sat atop another cube with the greeting WELCOME TO THE EAST 60TH STREET COMMUNITY YOUTH CENTER CHILL HOUSE, which rested on a block reading CLOSED FOR MURDER & DISRESPECT OF BLACK PEOPLE. Referencing the time of the Watts Rebellion, Halsey emphasized the community building that takes place in spite of structural violence. Poet Douglas Kearney's essay for the exhibition reminded viewers of the many businesses, like the ones represented here, that face displacement or have been shuttered by gentrification. In this sense, Halsey's installation responded to a question asked of participants in the Mississippi Freedom Schools of the civil rights movement: "What do we have that we want to keep?" What this question assumes, Fred Moten has said, "is (a) that they've got something that they want to keep, and (b) that not only do those people who were fucking them over not have everything, but . . . that we don't want everything they have."

By constructing a space out of what she chose to collect and preserve, Halsey served as both an archivist and an architect, asking not only what an aesthetics of liberation might look like, but also how we can put art to *work*, addressing two concerns central to much art of our moment. Halsey has centered her practice on collaborations, which often lead to the creation of community gathering spaces or memorials. (Halsey also plans to open a community center in South Central LA this year.) The installation at David Kordansky Gallery, however, was not exactly a gathering space in the way that her recent projects for the city—a pavilion prototype at the Hammer Museum and a grotto-like installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art—seemed to be. As Halsey commented in a 2016 interview with the artist Todd Gray, "The issue for my practice has been that I've been proposing these alternatives for the neighborhood, outside of it."

In a direct way, this installation addressed the complex business of bringing the signs of South Central LA into a commercial gallery. So much recent art asks us to become aware of our bodies in institutional space, which Halsey did here via the prominence of mirrored surfaces. But the installation also pushed for a different kind of understanding, asking viewers to think about their positions across space and time. Spatially, what is our lived proximity to South Central and to the gallery space? Temporally, what is our relation to the various moments in time represented, to black history? The installation seemed less like an alternative architecture that could be replicated elsewhere and more like an archive that offered something different to each viewer who encountered it. One towering cube measuring ten feet to a side and titled *The Black History Wall of Respect* (all works 2020) featured the visages of dozens of black luminaries on mirrored squares. Looking into their faces, you saw yourself. Some visitors could find affirmation and identification in this reflection and the materials memorialized around it. Those who did not understand themselves as part of this lineage could take their presence in the installation as an opportunity to think about the way their own bodies occupy space, and about their proximity to displacement and structures of violence.

—*Ashton Cooper*