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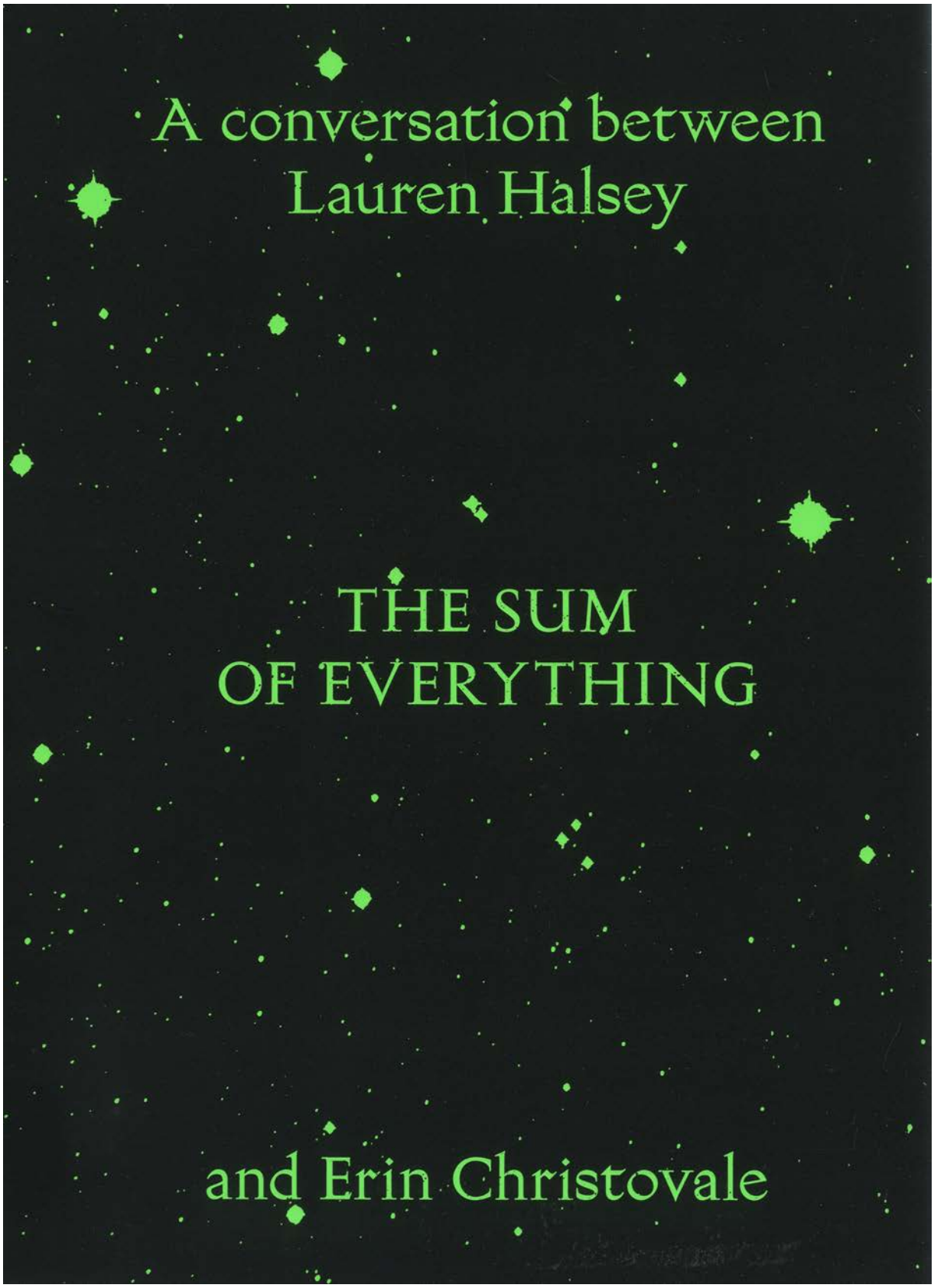

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**ERIN CHRISTOVALE**

I know your family has deep roots in Los Angeles. What's the origin story?

**LAUREN HALSEY**

The first wave was my paternal grandparents. My grandmother came here with her family when she was two, in 1927, with her twin and her older brothers and sisters. And they came straight to South Central. At one point in that journey, they moved to where my family is now. My father was born there. And we've been there ever since. So there's all this neighborhood stuff—poetics and history and people and characters—that is still in my life. It is pulsing strong, all this residue from the 1930s, '60s, '70s, to the '90s riot.

**EC**

The whole history.

**LH**

And it's living. My grandmother, who went to the KRST African Unity Center—and I went there with her a few times—she had stuff I didn't even know about. I wish I had known more about her when she was alive. But I got some of her things after she passed. She created this metaphysical universe, Black God spiritualism, where she was writing about geometry. Like Sun Ra. It blew my mind. I'm not even ready to read all of it yet.

**EC**

Wow. So you have her theories?

**LH**

Yeah, in cursive. She was writing Afrofuturistic stuff. I don't know where she inherited that from. I've been trying to decode it as I take on the weight of reading it. I have so much stuff, so many recipes from people. My aunt's book collection, which is super radical. I have this crazy image of my uncle Rainey graduating from high school in 1970-something; it says "high school," like that classic image of students on the lawn—almost all Black kids, just two white. So there is all this stuff, and having a studio—for at least six years—has been an amazing laboratory to mix things and figure out how to actually care for an archive and not just stuff it into boxes. Not only to be careful with it, but to get the space and time to explore it and share it with my friends and to have it on the walls when people come in. Imagine if it was up, and you were here, and you could be in this portal of 1960-something.

**EC**

So beautiful.

**LH**

My maternal grandmother came to South Central when she was sixteen and moved in the '60s or '70s to the home where my studio is currently located in the garage. And we've been there ever since as well. In that space, I've inherited a lot of beautiful people, and play cousins, and play grandmothers. And cool moments in Black L.A. that I would otherwise have no access to, just from moving into my grandmother's garage. She had six kids, and all their stuff is there in the garage. From high school, from middle school. And I'm going through it all and seeing idiosyncratic things—periodicals, tapes with everything from speeches to gospels, to mixtapes.

**EC**

And that's really your foundation, having access to these archives and being curious enough to go through it all. How do you justify what aspects of these archives show up in your work and how these intimate items might be interpreted in public spaces?

**LH**

I feel like I'm reintroducing myself, but also making objects and not diluting or flattening subject or content, but thinking about what's appropriate and what's not and when and how and proper context. But also, the first thing I think of is something that [writer and musician] Greg Tate said to me: "Black

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archive, to building, to getting hands-on architecture, body, sweat. And then it could be a container for all these really beautiful moments and interventions. That was the thought. And then I transferred to California College of the Arts and it was the total opposite. It wasn't about the hand. I mean the way of making models.

**EC**

It wasn't as hands-on?

**LH**

No, it wasn't tactile. We weren't in the field building with the construction kids. We were working with these very slick computer programs and rendering software, which was great. And then we were getting these proposals that had nothing to do with neighborhood, only with form, and so I went back to El Camino and then I applied to CalArts [California Institute of the Arts] with these blueprints and studies and bus drawings that just really documented the neighborhood and certain boulevards.

**EC**

And I see these origins show up so prominently as you embark on your first public artwork, *The Crenshaw District Hieroglyph Project*. What do you hope this artwork, this monument, and this dedication to your community will accomplish?

**LH**

I totally believe in and am excited about collaborating with other people, if they want to. To not only author a structure but to build and design it together with our hands, as a statement on—especially now—building, development, displacement, and also just inheriting traumatic architecture. Inheriting traumatic environments,
and wanting to push up against that in a way that's not just about celebration and "Let's have a party and a parade." But, rather, getting back to the total experience, where it could be about Tommy the Clown in one moment; it could be about the sign; it could be about the clouds. It can also pay homage to people who have passed for various reasons. Violence. So it would do all these things at once. And then it can be a container. It can be multimedia. It can be whatever it needs to be. Because it's an artwork.

**EC**

Yeah. Can you talk a little about this idea of bringing in the community to inscribe on the panels of the structure and things like that? Are you letting people do what they want? Are there specific people within the community you want to bring in to do that? How are you thinking through the people interfacing with the creation of the work?

**LH**

My idea for that is to get one of those storage units, or a few of them, and turn it into an open-air studio for however long I can afford to do it, at least six months, and to hire my friends or other people to sort of run the table, where I imagine drawing will happen, carving will happen. There will be an archivist who's making recordings, audio and video images. I don't want it to be a Disneyland monument of South Central; I want it to be as much of a mirror reflection of the time in all eras as it can be. So people can do whatever they want to do. The only thing that I guess I'll filter is if it gets into gang stuff, and then I'll do what I do in my own practice and just edit out the dis and rewrite the sentences. I don't want to be heavy handed with compositions, with choosing. If the project is going to be meaningful and honest and convey the truth, it has to be a portrait that comes from everyone, from all angles—problematic, not problematic, beauty, tragedy. Which is the complete experience of Blackness, especially in this moment, the transition that we're in at large in Los Angeles.

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**EC**

And to speak more on gang affiliations, I thought it was interesting that you incorporated tags onto the panels of your Made in L.A. structure. Because, again, speaking about what you're saying, it's all of it—communities come with so many different angles and peoples and ways of protecting and histories, and I feel like you've consistently considered all angles of your community and integrated that into your work in a way that doesn't feel hierarchical or trying to lead with a certain narrative over another. It always feels like it's all there, the sum of everything. And so I guess with that, I'm curious about your relationship to some of these gangs, if you feel comfortable talking about it.

**LH**

You can't help but notice them, because they want to be seen, the amount of tags. I can remember as a kid sleeping on the couch with my mother and hearing the sound of spray paint. Because garages were the perfect canvas, and there were two just below our apartment. So the sound of the spray paint. I see empathy in their narrative, and their backgrounds, their biographies, and just the cards they were dealt. And also what police do to the hearts—crushing the hearts of these men—because I've always had the privilege of just being a weird Pokémon Black girl walking from Manchester and Western to Crenshaw and Manchester. No one ever bothered me, ever. It just would never happen.

**EC**

Yes. Thinking about Nipsey Hussle's death and about how he was a business owner, a family man, a rapper, a proud gang member, and just thinking about the nuances of that, and obviously the larger narratives that society creates around gangs and the sole focus on violence. But, as you were saying, these are people who sometimes just need a support system, need some sense of family, and who see these groups as a unit to build from. I think that's what was so inspiring about Nipsey, how he built from that structure and moved forward into becoming a businessman. I would even argue that what he learned on the streets, how to navigate certain people, helped him in his business world. I think it's beautiful that you bring in that aspect in your work, because it's a part of the community.

**LH**

I'm so curious to know what's going to happen with the gangs as the city continues to change. Do the Eight Treys go to Las Vegas? Do they end up in Palmdale and claim new territory? Are the Inglewood Families going to become extinct once the stadiums come? And where will these Black men organize together?

**EC**

Do you have any predictions around that in terms of people migrating and leaving the city? What do you think the city is going to look like in a few years?

**LH**

I saw in the paper the other day that Uplift Inglewood has been doing all this work for at least three years. They got rent control in Inglewood to 5 percent. That's amazing. And that's a huge step. Having said that, I don't know. I don't think it's going to look like what I've known it to ever look like. I think over time all of these Black and Brown neighborhoods that aren't labeled "historic" are going to be taken over and consumed by capitalism and developers and the global market and the Olympics and real estate.

**EC**

Exactly. Speaking of the work that's being done in Inglewood, can you talk about some of the organizations you've been working with and/or appreciate that are really trying to work against some of this?

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**LH**

I would say the Crenshaw Subway Coalition is effortless, fearless; they're just totally in. And they're in court, as is Uplift Inglewood, against these developers. I guess it's a different monster machine when you have global investment and millions of dollars and resources. And I know personally from Crenshaw Subway Coalition that their bench isn't that deep, you know what I mean? But the effort is amazing. It's inspiring. And I'm sure there are groups right now who are going to be in court next week for something. I love that L.A. is not just taking it. And there's a protest or some form of resistance, whether in the courtroom or on the street, every week.

**EC**

For the organizations that you are considering working with on this project in particular, what draws you to them?

**LH**

For this project, I was 100 percent drawn to Los Angeles Black Worker Center, because Monique and I were on a hunt for Black contractors for a proposal package for the project and we couldn't find one.

**EC**

What?

**LH**

We couldn't find one. So we were Googling, we were meeting, we were calling. We couldn't find one. I couldn't even find Black carpenters. We go to the Black Worker Center, and they're filling these positions every day on the field—residentially, commercially, for the city—and they were able to create these connections and do it just like that. All of a sudden, I had a Black contractor. So I want to work with them urgently, deeply for *The Crenshaw District Hieroglyph Project*. I also want to work with T.R.U.S.T. South L.A. One of the directors there, Malcolm [Harris], is working on projects in the city—I think around the USC area—where he's implementing cooperative economics, community land trust models.

**EC**

To delve more into your practice, I've been thinking a lot about what it means to be Black and from L.A., or even Black and from California. For me, it always goes back to music. When I think about experimental jazz or funk and soul, their origins are felt really strongly here in this state. When the Hammer's exhibition *Now Dig This! Art & Black Los Angeles* was up [in 2011], there was a panel and Dr. Kellie Jones [the curator] said this really interesting thing, that Black folks in California are different because they have a different access to space and land. So there's a certain liberation that Black folks here have, and in the creative sector that starts with music. And so, obviously, music is super important to your practice. I'm thinking about Parliament and some of the more California-based music and musicians that have informed your work.

**LH**

Yeah. I grew up as a kid into my late twenties always going to a backyard party. Speaking of space, everyone has a backyard and repurposes it for whatever that moment needs to be. Going to garage parties and really getting into people's taste. Parliament was huge, and it was huge, of course, because G-funk was sampling it. And it was really cool because you had the youth, and my cousins who were a few years older than me, and then our parents all being into Parliament at the same time, and so I was attracted to that. It wasn't just like old folks' music, which I'm totally into now. I guess Parliament gave me an imagination, or maybe empowered, instigated an imagination. As a kid, being a loner, not in an emo way but just a loner and liking to be kind of lonely in my room, I would listen to Parliament and go on that trip with them,

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starting with their album *Chocolate City*, to outer space to underwater to Egypt—they're really great at being maximalists sonically, musically. There are all these things going on at once. But then also all the shit-talking and storytelling that's happening all on the same track. George Clinton's decoding lyrics backwards, bong rips are happening, all this stuff. So there's that, and then there's the maximalism of concepts and storytelling and being deeply embedded in the character. It's like watching a score, like Martin Scorsese films or something, and you're just in it.

So I became an expert on them. And then YouTube came out, and I was actually able to place them and see what they looked like. I was able to watch the funk operas they were doing. They were out in the 1960s, but it was their '76, '77, '78, and '79 hardcore funk albums that defined funk forever. So I was able to watch them for the first time and visualize all these concerts and the sculptures they were making. And having at one point eighty people in the band as Funkateers pledging allegiance to this Black freedom of self. I was coming into my queerness but not really understanding it, and to see George performing his masculinity with a blond wig and stilettos, this just opened up the world for me. To see him use women as stars of the show. The Brides of Funkenstein and Parliament. And in some moments they are sexualized, but their whole persona in the band wasn't hypersexed. They're storytellers and narrators as well as characters. It was just this party in my head. I guess I ended up using Photoshop because I had images of Parliament stuck in my head that I had to get out—the blueprints came from that.

**EC**

And speaking about them as maximalists…

**LH**

With control too. They never lose control. It's always in the pocket, tight. Which is a great way to be a maximalist.

**EC**

Yes, this desire for abundance, the overflow of objects and density. I see that especially in your earlier work. And I'm curious about that because, obviously, thinking about how collage and assemblage show up in your work—those two things are very much at the essence of Black artistic production. Both of those practices come from a sort of musical philosophy of jazz or blues, where it's about improvisation, it's about building something, it's about using objects that are secondhand or that don't belong to us, but we learn how to use them or we take agency over those objects and flip them. I see you as part of a legacy of that type of practice.

**LH**

I think it's just some of the neighborhood aesthetic as well, and going to local swap meets and outdoor malls. I'm not even talking about the Slauson, because that one's more curated, but going to other local swap meets that are one-fifth the size of the Slauson but where there are a million vendors and you walk into a booth and you're hit by socks in your face. You have slippers, you have hats. There's all this material and you have to learn how to read all this information in this very physical experience at once. And then the stuff accumulates because they're not taking out old inventory. Also, growing up and being in certain people's homes. I remember when I was going to church every Sunday, and we would pick up Sister Fritz, who lived three minutes away from my grandma's house on the way to church, and I would have to be the one to go knock on the door and say, "Sister Fritz, we're here." She'd be sitting in a chair just waiting, and it would take her a while to get up, so she would invite me in. And when she would invite me in, I was just—people would

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use the word "hoarding," but I'm totally offended by that word. I just always thought of it as a different way of organizing material and space. It wasn't like it was a mess or it wasn't clean; she just had piles of books on top of piles of tapes and vinyl and da da da da da, her own knickknacks, the Black characters. I was always just in awe. And then I was hanging out in a lot of garages and watching people, my father included, you know, doing the DIY thing. I watched him and his friends have building projects every weekend to make more space and to not throw things away, to let them accumulate and create new associations, new uses for them. So going to the swap meet, going to the stores, going to Sister Fritz's house—that made Parliament's density feel right on time with what I was already experiencing, density in Black spaces, whether it was a store or at home, or whatever.

But that work you're talking about, that was my favorite stuff to make because I was able to do it in school, when no one wants anything from you. So time doesn't exist. The stuff you're talking about, I made it for a year. And I lived in it. And it just accumulated. And as I was out in the world I would add to it. I was able to make decisions that I could sit on for a week or two because time was different. So in my studio now, I want to start a similar project, where I'm just building it in the studio and it doesn't go anywhere. Maybe it gets built for a year and then it goes somewhere so that it can become like soulful material as opposed to trying to re-perform it in cities and finding myself just arranging or curating or something because of how time works in the art world, which I get.

**EC**

I think that's an important aspect of your practice, because I've always seen it, and especially the earlier work, as a slow accumulation of your lived experience—all the little things that come with that, or the things that you find along the way that are connected to these communities and neighborhoods.

**LH**

I remember for the first installation, I spent the first five months just painting signage. At the time I thought I was going to be a sign painter because I loved it so much. But I was able to go on a tangent because there was time. So now it's just about making that time, knowing what the schedule is now.

**EC**

Going back to what you were saying about Sister Fritz, I was having a conversation with someone who is first generation here and her grandma collects all these things. And she's like, "You know, I think it's an immigrant thing," and I was like, "You know, I think you're right." But even larger than that is when folks have had to operate out of survival and have had a history of an experience of migration or fugitivity. Then objects and what they mean for people take on so much more importance and hold histories and homes inside of them. How does that relate to your interest in the archive, the Black archive in L.A., the state that it's in right now, which I think is highly vulnerable? How are you wanting to historicize the archive that's around you?

**LH**

I have a lot of material. I have everything from the Colby [Poster Printing Company] posters, the post-Colby posters, which are like the most handmade of anything I have. People had to take it to the cardboard or just a sheet of printer paper to advertise when they closed in 2012. I have a ton of incense. I have party flyers, business cards, Hood Graphic Design stuff. I have a lot of mix CDs, which I like. The titles are the best. I have a lot more—a lot of stuff. I've been talking

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about my practice also functioning as this sort of agency for things where it could be about a shoe. It could be about a rapper. It could be about a sculpture. It could be about fashion. It could be about tutoring. And I've been thinking maybe there's a way one day that I can buy a building dedicated to South Central L.A. archives. That's my idea, because right now I don't know who would hold that archive and then show it in the way that I would want it to be shown and experienced, and also bring in a lot of the people that the stuff came from.

**EC**

Spaces that have helped specifically Black archives for years are in vulnerable positions, such as the Mayme A. Clayton Library & Museum in Culver City, which was recently evicted from its physical space. Other spaces like the William Grant Still Arts Center in West Adams are still doing a great job of bringing in local archives, but the city is in a situation where things are shifting, and Black histories are being actively erased or just lost, or they're not deemed as important. These are really the times where those objects are crucial because they're all that we have left, in a sense. And so I think having some sort of archival practice within your larger practice is so important. It replenishes your practice, too, because you're constantly pulling from these signifiers, these images, these moments and bringing them into your work and building these worlds.

**LH**

I recently bought these cat figurines that Black women keep in their living rooms—cheetahs and jaguars. When I was growing up, this woman Peaches bought them for my grandmother, and I inherited them when she passed. And we were driving around in the neighborhood and I saw them in a window, and I bought all the cats. And so that's going to become part of the archive.

**EC**

Yes, a cat garden. I love that so much.

**LH**

And because it's curated by me, I pick and choose. I think it would be best if I present it and bring in these people who created it whom I'm obsessed with, who are huge players in our life for me. That's my goal. And I'd love to show it in artworks without it being sold.

**EC**

Yeah. I hear that. And I've always appreciated how intentional you are about that from start to finish with your practice, from production to even in the work. It's really thinking about who's owning this work, who's putting their hands on this work, whose histories are going into this work. And in thinking about art production and a political stance, I feel like your practice really embodies some of the most progressive ways of holistically thinking about production. It's an everyday application, working with the people you know, your friends, your family; working with organizations that you feel support what you're interested in and the communities that you love.