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ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

## Lauren Halsey's monumental sculpture park opens in South-Central L.A., part of a 'Black renaissance' in art



L.A. artist Lauren Halsey, who created a monumental work of installation art for — and about — her South Los Angeles neighborhood, is photographed at 'sister dreamer' on Tuesday. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

**By Jane Horowitz**

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- Artist Lauren Halsey opens 'sister dreamer,' a monumental sculpture park celebrating South-Central Los Angeles, at Western Avenue and 76th Street on Saturday.
- The monument features 22-foot columns carved with images of community heroes and mentors. It also honors victims of serial killer Lonnie David Franklin Jr., restoring their dignity.
- After nearly two decades of development, the feminist installation will host art, education and wellness programming at a site once home to Gwen's Ice Cream, a neighborhood gem.

Artist Lauren Halsey has built an architectural monument to South Los Angeles — its past, present and future.

Her sculpture park, titled "sister dreamer lauren halsey's architectural ode to tha surge n splurge of south central los angeles,"

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opens with a block party Saturday on the corner of Western Avenue and 76th Street.

Part meeting place, outdoor classroom and recreation space, "sister dreamer" features eight Egyptian-style Hathoric columns standing nearly 22 feet tall, on which Halsey has swapped the ancient goddess for "hyperlocal" heroes, mentors and family members alongside sphinxes and carved reliefs. The sculptures stand as both witnesses and deities.

A large open-air square, which Halsey calls an oculus, contains carvings of neighborhood landmarks, faces, signs and symbols. Fountains, benches and native plants, along with vegetable and fruit gardens, sit behind a gate, giving the space a sense of calm despite the traffic nearby.



Lauren Halsey's 'sister dreamer' sculpture park in South Los Angeles contains sphinxes and carved reliefs alongside Egyptian-style Hathoric columns featuring faces of Halsey's mentors and family members. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

The title of the park, which will remain at this location through November 2027, hints at its feminist underpinnings.

An entrance to the park's central oculus features images honoring female victims of Lonnie David Franklin Jr., known as the Grim Sleeper, a serial killer responsible for the murders of at least 10 Black women in Los Angeles in the 1980s and the early aughts.

Halsey said the women's identities were reduced to billboard images during the investigation of their deaths.

The monument seeks to restore dignity to their memory while also celebrating community leaders such as Margaret Prescod, founder of the Black Coalition Fighting Back Serial Murders, Robin Daniels of the nonprofit Sisters of Watts, and Rosie Lee Hooks, director of the Watts Towers Arts Center Campus.

State Sen. Lola Smallwood-Cuevas (D-Los Angeles), who helped establish the Historic South Los Angeles Black Cultural District where the park sits, sees the project as a rare feminist monument.

"There are so few [monuments and parks] dedicated to women," she said. "I would suspect that every good feminist around the world will want to come and spend some time there to really take in that energy and to be restored by it."

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Lauren Halsey's 'sister dreamer' sculpture park in South Los Angeles features a central oculus honoring victims of the serial killer Lonnie David Franklin Jr., known as the Grim Sleeper, responsible for the murders of at least 10 Black women in L.A. in the 1980s and early aughts. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

The project is the culmination of an idea about creating a tribute to her community that Halsey began developing nearly two decades ago while studying architecture at El Camino College. She later attended the California Institute of the Arts and earned an MFA from Yale University, going on to exhibit internationally. But she never forgot her hometown.

Her aim, Halsey said, is to preserve the history of the neighborhood where she grew up while empowering its residents through education, cultural programming and contemplation.

Gentrification has resulted in dramatic change in South L.A. since Halsey first conceived the park, but she says the monument is less about resistance than inspiration.

"This isn't a eulogy for South-Central. ... This isn't about who we were. It's very aspirational," Halsey said during an interview at the park days before its official opening.

It is, she added, of the "right now."



The public sculpture park in South-Central Los Angeles will host a variety of public programs including readings, educational gatherings and film screenings. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

Halsey chose the location deliberately — it was once home to Gwen's Ice Cream, a beloved neighborhood spot that closed after a fire in the mid-2010s and remained vacant for years.

"When I realized I could envision this project and actually make it happen, this lot felt really right," Halsey said.

Halsey's nonprofit, Summaeverythang Community Center, will organize programming at the park around three pillars: art, education and wellness. Plans include film screenings, lectures, tutoring, youth workshops and community events.

A partnership with the Broad museum will bring local students to the site for art workshops and educational programs.

Los Angeles City Council President Marqueece Harris-Dawson, who represents the park's district, said Halsey's work reflects a global "Black renaissance" in art.

He described "sister dreamer" as the "first tangible installation at this scale of the work coming out of this period."

Harris-Dawson is also helping oversee the development of Destination Crenshaw, a nearby 1.3-mile open-air museum and cultural corridor. "sister dreamer" joins the area's artistic milieu in advance of another long-planned project by artist Fulton Leroy Washington — Mr. Wash — who is raising funds for a 13,000-square-foot campus called Art By Wash Studio & Community Center that is scheduled to open in 2028.



Lauren Halsey chose to locate her public sculpture park, "sister dreamer," where a beloved neighborhood ice cream shop once stood. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

Taken together, these projects demonstrate what artists can accomplish outside of traditional institutional frameworks.

Laura Hyatt, director of the presenting nonprofit organization Los Angeles Nomadic Division (LAND), said roughly half of the funding for the project came from the Mellon Foundation's Monuments Project, with the rest raised from other foundations and private donors. LAND and Halsey's representatives declined to give the project's budget.

Halsey sought independent funding in order to maintain creative control.

"I wanted for once in my career to make work where I can think about who I'm making the work for and why," she said. "I have the keys."

Hyatt said the project's size surprised even those involved in producing it.

"I don't think any of us understood at the outset what magnitude that would be," she said. "It's really all a testament to Lauren and the relationships she's forged in her neighborhood."



Lauren Halsey will use her community nonprofit to schedule the public programming at "sister dreamer." (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

"sister dreamer" builds on earlier iterations of Halsey's explorations of classical architecture, including installations at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2015, at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 2018 and on the rooftop of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2023.

"I used the art world as a stage to test the proof of concepts and prototypes," Halsey said.

The project's curator, Christine Y. Kim, said "sister dreamer" gained momentum during the pandemic, when the need for public gathering spaces became urgent.

The park will be open Wednesday through Sunday from sunrise to sunset.



Native plants, along with vegetable and fruit gardens, are part of the plan for Lauren Halsey's monumental public sculpture park in South-Central Los Angeles. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

Community members are already welcoming the new landmark.

"We have libraries. We have temples, churches, schools and some local art institutions, but we don't have essentially a public place, a literal form that represents all these things," said Zaakiyah Brisker, founder of the South Central Run Club.

Marvin Valencia, co-founder of South Central Clips, which documents South Los Angeles life on Instagram and TikTok, said Halsey's project resonates because it comes from someone rooted in the neighborhood.

"There's nothing better than when someone from the community does things for [it], as opposed to outsiders coming in and shaping it," Valencia said. "She's bringing culture from other places and mixing it with what South-Central already has to offer."

Kim said "sister dreamer" offers a different vision of what public memorials can be.

"Monuments are intended to valorize battles and generals," she said. "This particular monument is really about saying, for the people of the neighborhood: We are here. We have been here. And this is our representation of the joy and beauty of us."

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