

Smith, Danyel, "Lauren Halsey's Art Brought South Central L.A. to the World. Now, She's Bringing It Home.,"
HarpersBazaar.com, March 17, 2026

BAZAAR^{Harpers}



STEVEN TRAYLOR

CULTURE > ART, BOOKS & MUSIC

Lauren Halsey's Art Brought South Central L.A. to the World. Now, She's Bringing It Home.

The artist's new sculpture park is a living monument to the
community that raised her

STORY BY DANYEL SMITH AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVEN TRAYLOR PUBLISHED: MAR 17, 2026

Smith, Danyel, "Lauren Halsey's Art Brought South Central L.A. to the World. Now, She's Bringing It Home.,"
HarpersBazaar.com, March 17, 2026

It's a beautiful day in Lauren Halsey's neighborhood. The fog that rolls off the Pacific onto Southern California's beach cities rarely, if ever, touches what used to be called South Central, the area of Los Angeles immortalized in *Boyz n the Hood*, *Menace II Society*, *Snowfall*, and *Middle of Nowhere*—which South Central most definitely is not.

Smogless sun slaps down from dawn on, and this morning it's not only reflecting off the tiny gold busts of Nefertiti crowded on Halsey's delicate earlobes, it's warming her new extraordinary courtyard, her funkified quadrangle, her reimagined town square.



STEVEN TRAYLOR

Lauren Halsey, in her own clothes throughout

We're standing by one of six soon-to-be-activated water features in the 38-year-old artist's epic new installation *sister dreamer: lauren halsey's architectural ode to tha surge n splurge of south central los angeles*. It's a monument to the neighborhood where she grew up and still lives and works, and it's a glimpse inside a future she began conceiving in 2006, while she was still an architecture student, wondering what it would mean to build something imperishable in the neighborhood she calls home.

The mood of the space is freedom, and it is contagious. Somewhat reductively

Smith, Danyel, “Lauren Halsey’s Art Brought South Central L.A. to the World. Now, She’s Bringing It Home.,”
HarpersBazaar.com, March 17, 2026

referred to as a sculpture park, *sister dreamer* unfurls across roughly three residential-size lots on the corner of Western Avenue and 76th Street, not far from Summaeverythang Community Center, the nonprofit she founded in 2020, for which she is also in the process of building a permanent home. The structures are more architectural than ornamental, more muscular than picturesque. Etched into thick panels are previously ephemeral 'hood graphics, hairstyles, and catchphrases, deconstructed logos, and familiar poses. Hathoric columns in tribute to locals—Rosie Lee Hooks, the director of Watts Towers Arts Center; Susan Burton of A New Way of Life, a reentry program for incarcerated women—rise as sphinx-like figures in watchful repose and guard Halsey’s undeferred dream. Raspberry orange trees reach for the light, while thirsty grapevines curl along shelves of what looks like stone.

But it’s not stone. Known as GFRC, the glass-fiber-reinforced concrete Halsey used to create the structures is stronger than traditional concrete, engineered to endure environments as yet unseen. Across the street, an ARCO filling station manages a lively queue. Beep-beep, go the cars. Boom-boom, kicks the bass. All this is to say that while Halsey’s audacious work is solid as a rock, it’s also a party-line call with her community and beyond.

“I’m SPEAKING to and WITH my COMMUNITY.”

“South L.A.” is the official name, adopted in 2003, for the region south of Interstate 10, covering more than 50 square miles, of neighborhoods like Watts, Crenshaw, and Baldwin Hills. This “rebrand” of South Central—an attempt to shed associations with the crime and poverty of the 1980s and '90s—smells of erasure. Many residents still use the historic term as a representation of pride, Black and Latino culture, and resilience.

“People often ask me how it was growing up in South Central,” Halsey says with an expansive gesture that is half shrug and half invitation to experience the sights and soul of the village that raised her. “I’m asked like I was always terrified or something. It was the best place in the world, and I loved every single minute of it.”

Western Avenue is among the very longest north-south corridors in L.A. and one Halsey experienced a lot as a bus passenger. “People don’t realize how much you see when you’re a transit rider,” she says. “How the images stack. How you notice both the most striking samenesses and most subtle of changes. It’s the pace in which you see it,” she says from the center of her radiant colonnade. “I used to make these bus drawings on newsprint, sort of indexing the businesses and churches and how we made things.”

Smith, Danyel, "Lauren Halsey's Art Brought South Central L.A. to the World. Now, She's Bringing It Home.," *HarpersBazaar.com*, March 17, 2026



STEVEN TRAYLOR

Lauren Halsey's sister dreamer: lauren halsey's architectural ode to the surge and splurge of south central los angeles

It's the thickets of steel scissor gates. The turquoise and lemon-yellow storefronts. The placards that are neither centered, nor aligned left, nor aligned right. The *lavanderías*. The fragrant rooms serving smothered turkey wings or blood-clam ceviche. Milk crates of plantains. It's that upright iron canine with its walking stick standing sentry outside the no-tell Snooty Fox motel since the '80s. What feels random or unrefined to outsiders feels to so many locals sharp with the culture of biological and fictive kin. The bright exteriors and freehand signs convey a hyperlocal market intelligence—and a commitment to an idea.

This is Halsey's palette.

Then she swirls in music. She started out listening to G-Funk: Warren G, DJ Quik, Above the Law. Then, in that progression familiar to rap fans, she graduated to mixtape funk CDs sold in parking lots and at swap meets. Her postgrad funk education came during the LimeWire era, when she downloaded entire catalogs.

G-Funk originated in South Central, and Halsey's father—an accountant and lover of original funk—passed down his passion for those revolutionary sounds of his heyday. There is a particular day she remembers, riding home from her college-preparatory high school in Mid City, when her dad played her Parliament's 1978 "Aqua Boogie (A Psychoalphadiscobetabioaquadoloop)." Many listeners forget that "Aqua Boogie" riffs on the fraught relationship many Black Americans have with water—from the Middle Passage to segregated beaches and pools—even as it renders an underwater Black fantasia where you can dance submerged and not get your hair wet.

Smith, Danyel, “Lauren Halsey’s Art Brought South Central L.A. to the World. Now, She’s Bringing It Home.,”
HarpersBazaar.com, March 17, 2026



STEVEN TRAYLOR

The layered complexity of funk not only informed Halsey’s art—it also freed her mind. “Conflating Blackness with pyramid worlds, cosmic worlds, aqua worlds,” she tells me, “just gave me some spaciousness in my brain to represent us.”

This work, *sister dreamer*, monumentalizes what she calls the “regular genius” of a very specific Southern California Blackness—one shaped by modest bungalows on big lots, lush lawns, and classic cars resting on Truespoke wire wheels and Vogue whitewalls. Standing inside her powerful patio, there is an intoxicating weightlessness. It’s mostly relief—of not being strategically misunderstood or violently forgotten. Her plot is a kind of playground. But it’s also a tribute and a gathering space. And she has big plans for pulling people in and helping them feel even more seen.

“I’m starting off with youth initiatives,” Halsey says. “There’ll be educational initiatives, drop-ins for doing homework, or a STEM class on architectural imagination. Or it’ll be Kemeti yoga, a sound bath, or the Sisters of Watts [community organization]—who are my heroes—leading a line-dancing class. This place will just shape-shift.”

Smith, Danyel, "Lauren Halsey's Art Brought South Central L.A. to the World. Now, She's Bringing It Home.," *HarpersBazaar.com*, March 17, 2026

"1, 2, 3, 4 ... Then you would try to fit your different notes, what you felt, in between that. ... And that's the funk. ... It's however you feel, but you just have to fit it between that space ... which is 1, 2, 3, 4. ... Then you want to break it down." —Bootsy Collins, 1983

“PEOPLE often ask me how it was GROWING UP in South Central. ... I LOVED every single MINUTE of it.”

Halsey knows a bit about pivoting. By her own count, she spent five years at El Camino College in Torrance, California. She salutes the school's architecture program especially for teaching her that she didn't really want to be an architect. So she applied and was accepted to the California Institute of the Arts, which she attended while living in a tiny bedroom built into the back of a detached garage on her grandmother's property. From there, it was off to the Yale School of Art, where she earned her MFA, followed by a year in the Studio Museum in Harlem's vaunted artist-in-residence program. She is represented by David Kordansky and Gagosian, and her work has been exhibited at the Hammer, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Fondation Louis Vuitton, among other blue-chip galleries and institutions.

Yet as Halsey has moved from one elite space to another, she has carried South Central. Her 2023 rooftop commission at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, *the eastside of south central los angeles hieroglyph prototype architecture (I)*, literally placed South Central in the halls of the Western canon. The 22-foot-high installation, which referenced the museum's Temple of Dendur, was covered with phrases and symbols drawn from the visual language and history of her neighborhood. The following year, Halsey took over a gallery at London's Serpentine with *emajendat*, a "funk garden" tribute to her stomping grounds filled with images, sculptural elements, iconography, plants, and "funkmounds," along with thousands of discarded CDs, the mirrored sides of which cast prisms of light.

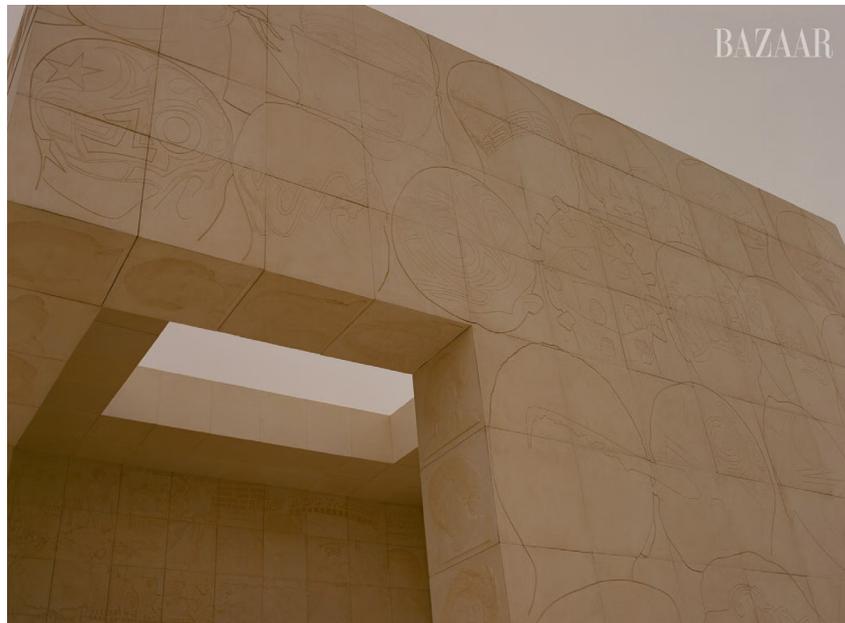
"She's physicalizing relationships to her family and her community," Kordansky, her longtime gallerist, told the *Los Angeles Times* in 2019, "in sculptural and architectural form."

Last year, Halsey's art appeared as part of the stage set for Kendrick Lamar on his and SZA's Grand National Tour. Her meticulously stratified 2022 piece "Untitled"—inspired in turn by an earlier 2020 one, "work thang," with its shout-outs to Funkadelic and *One Nation Under a Groove*—served as the backdrop for Lamar's performance of "Not Like Us." It would become the highest-grossing coheadline tour of all time; Halsey's work was seen by more than 1.5 million people.

Smith, Danyel, "Lauren Halsey's Art Brought South Central L.A. to the World. Now, She's Bringing It Home.," *HarpersBazaar.com*, March 17, 2026



STEVEN TRAYLOR



STEVEN TRAYLOR

Halsey's creative exchange with Lamar is a braid of familial, ambitious, and musical lore. She reimagined the cover of his third album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, as a 2015 gypsum-on-wood piece that was shown at LACMA. Former NBA player Arron Afflalo, who Lamar name-checks on the bonus track "Black Boy Fly," from 2012's *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City*, is also Halsey's cousin. Halsey, who was active on a travel team in her teens, often played with Afflalo; for a while, she dreamed of making it to the WNBA. When I ask her if she still shoots around for fun, she is pained. "I couldn't," she says. "I'd have to get a trainer and work and actually play."

Halsey calls 2026 her "year of independent projects," beginning with *sister dreamer*. "I'm not going to cry," she says. "But it makes me emotional. ... For the first time in my career, I'm presenting a project where I'm speaking to and with my community, my neighborhood, and not on behalf of or for. I'm literally here,

Smith, Danyel, "Lauren Halsey's Art Brought South Central L.A. to the World. Now, She's Bringing It Home."
HarpersBazaar.com, March 17, 2026

in conversation. I could walk to my mother's house. I could jog to my grandma's house. I can go around the corner to my best friend's house. It's just so in-context."

Sister dreamer carries a different charge than her more institutional extravaganzas. It somehow holds both the immediacy of a Colby poster tacked to a telephone pole and the gravity of Pompeii's plaster casts—those haunting impressions of a city and its residents preserved after the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE.

Those casts, capturing the minute detail of bodies, belongings, and everyday objects, feel like ancient precursors to the current lava flow of cultural wipeout: book bans and funding cuts that gut the museums and libraries entrusted with preserving Black community histories, as well as the physical and structural violence. Even the glass-infused concrete Halsey uses—the same material employed in the "veil" facade of the Broad museum in downtown L.A.—reads, in its pale tonality, like plaster of paris. But in the South Central sun, it glows.



STEVEN TRAYLOR

If Pompeii teaches us anything, it is that preservation is often by chance. It arrives in the wake of disaster. Halsey, though, refuses accident. She builds with intention. Yet as the fragrance of sage wafts by, and final touches are set by gardeners, and conversations about inspections hover, the terrible wonder of Halsey's courtyard gets louder. The space asks, frankly, are we treading on our own tombstones? Or are we planting a flag in the future?

My vote is for the morrow. And it's because of the reverence Halsey has for the past, the present, and whatever comes next. In her work, there is deep respect for the pyramid builders, the around-the-way designers, and the everyday spatial tacticians: handworkers, beauticians and barbers, muralists, community

Smith, Danyel, "Lauren Halsey's Art Brought South Central L.A. to the World. Now, She's Bringing It Home.,"
HarpersBazaar.com, March 17, 2026

archivists. Halsey is a mirror tilted to a new angle. Objects in it are more complicated than they appear.

I ask her if she feels good or different now that *sister dreamer* exists—in a more complete way, outside of her head.

"No," she says. You really can smell the sage. It feels like the prelude of a conjuration and a preparation for the new. "I am grateful and blessed that it's here." She pauses to look around her space—our space—and beyond it to the larger universe of South Central. "But none of this," she says, "is resolved."
