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In a new monument for South-Central, Lauren Halsey cements her loved ones as landmarks



By **Julissa James**
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Someone said heaven is on the corner of 76th and Western.

It's nearly 90 degrees on a Saturday in South-Central and "sister dreamer lauren halsey's architectural ode to tha surge n splurge of south central los angeles" is gleaming and activated.

Thousands of people fill the streets that surround it in lit, ecstatic union. Parliament-Funkadelic is playing a live show onstage while we stomp the pavement in faithful entrancement. The line forming for fittingly swaggy merch becomes a site for sweet reunions unfolding one after another — some version of "this is crazy, this is amazing, this is L.A." being thrown back and forth on a loop. On the sidewalk, generations play spades in the shade and the joyful screams of children emanate from a custom bouncy house adorned with an Egyptian pharaoh bust. Across the way, skateboarders do their thing on the Neighbors Skate Shop ramp, flipping and flexing, making sculptures out of their bodies in midair, while others double-dutch or Hula-Hoop in exacting harmony.

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This block party — multigenerational, multivibrational — is in celebration of the sand-colored sanctuary and sculpture park that is "sister dreamer," a direct expression of its spirit and purpose.



From left to right: Andre "Sketch" Hampton, Emmanuel Carter, Lauren Halsey and Kenneth Blackmon.

Artist Lauren Halsey has been dreaming and scheming on this sculpture park for 17 years. (She has the Photobucket receipts to prove it.) The paper trail follows from her third semester studying architecture at El Camino College, when she used to take long bus rides down Western and project her ideas onto empty lots, cutting them together in Photoshop — part-planning, part-manifestation. Variations of these ideas have appeared at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the now-iconic Crenshaw District Hieroglyph Project at the Hammer, the rooftop at the Met and the Venice Biennale. But "sister dreamer" has always been the goal — a way to go beyond only representing or depicting her community and giving back to it in a tangible way.

The location of "sister dreamer" is specific and important — for one, it's the former site of neighborhood ice cream staple Gwen's Double Dip, a history honored at the block party through a pop-up parlor created by Halsey's studio. But it's also because Halsey grew up around the way and can trace her family history back more than 100 years to this place. She comes from a long line of people who have served their community and taught Halsey to do the same. "sister dreamer" is the culmination. Both a once-in-a-lifetime artwork and a free, public venue where every day, from dawn till dusk, people can live and imagine.

"From the beginning, the conceit was to summon all the types of experiences of Blackness in one place, the project being a vessel or container for all of that expression," Halsey says. "If I could create spaces that democratize Blackness because they're gorgeous, they're inclusive, they pay homage to all of us, that's just a cool type of unity I want to see. And if I could do that through funk as the language, it would also be fun and playful and attract the energies I'm looking for."

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"From the beginning, the conceit was to summon all the types of experiences of Blackness in one place," artist Lauren Halsey says about "sister dreamer."

To see L.A.'s newest architectural monument in effect is to experience people being celebrated. This public artwork and its function — as in, this party and the space's purpose — feels like a mirror, a temple to self, a shrine to funk, a dedication and invitation to experience what is still so divine and aspirational about the present moment. Writer Douglas Kearney illuminates it strikingly in the curatorial statement etched into a back wall in "sister dreamer": "... it's the sacred phenomenon of luxe space that remembers without memorializing, celebrates without eulogizing. An anti-tomb."

Life in its most beautiful forms — the poetic, artistic range of Black life in South-Central — is on display everywhere you look here.

Standing in the open-air cube that is the oculus of "sister dreamer," most people have their gaze pointed up, seeing — what else? — themselves. The entire space is dripping in the dense Black L.A.-meets-Egyptology that has become Halsey's signature. People run their fingers over carved reliefs telling the rich story of a neighborhood, culture and creed, reflecting the folk art that has existed in South-Central since forever. The hand-painted signage and hood graphics are familiar, the mantras and spiritual emblems — "Be Ye Who Ye Is," a spiral of cornrows wreathed on the back of a head, the comma-curve of an XL nail — are personal. Known legends stare back at us — hi, Sika — and others are finally given agency, including the Black women who were killed at the hands of the Grim Sleeper in the 1980s, their faces framing the entrance of the oculus like guardian angels.

"Lauren Halsey in her work brilliantly represents the range of contributions, resistance and resilience by our communities including the collective work I have been part of demanding payment for all caregiving work, and working for justice, dignity and visibility for the scores of Black women who were victims of serial murders in South L.A. and who were marginalized dehumanized and treated as throwaway women," says Margaret Prescod, founder of the Black Coalition Fighting Back Serial Murders.

These carved reliefs span dimensions of the Black L.A. experience — there's so much joy, there's this overdue reverence too; another, fuller frame. All of this is a result of Halsey's obsession with the way her community speaks to each other through visual language. There are five infinity fountains, also

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clad in carvings, punctuating the space while fragrant native plants perfume the warm, dry L.A. air, identified by information cards written in Halsey’s recognizable script. L.A.-based Current Interests served as the project architect, while Phil Davis came in as the landscape designer.

There are eight Hathoric columns and eight sphinxes in “sister dreamer” that honor local heroes, community workers and Halsey’s friends and family. “I love this sort of ceremonial procession as you walk through the sphinxes and columns — these figures who have created safe space for me, literally, conceptually, spiritually,” Halsey says. DaVinci, Bopbob, Barrington, Damien, Janine, Margaret, Susan and Rosie stand 22 feet tall, kissing the sky. While Dominic, Ajunae, Bobby, Monique, Glenda, Robin, Londyn and Antoinette ground us, warm expressions on long sphinx bodies, serving as ultimate anchors.



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Michael Towler and Dominique Moody.



Barrington Darius.

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“Seeing it in person, yeah, that was different. Compared to the work you’re doing in community, boots on the ground, and then actually seeing your picture, or you know — your face — on something like that, it is something you’ll never imagine,” says Robin Daniels, co-founder of Sisters of Watts, who is depicted as one of the sphinxes in “sister dreamer.”

First debuted in “the eastside of south central los angeles hieroglyph prototype architecture (i)” as part of New York’s skyline, this marks a homecoming for the columns and sphinxes. L.A.’s sons and daughters, mothers and grandmothers, uncles and aunts, leaders and stewards, artists and musicians, holding court on native soil. These are people, Halsey says, “who have summoned a love and care that I’ve admired, both on a micro and macro level.” Those depicted include Halsey’s mother, whom she wanted to put on a physical pedestal for her family, for the neighborhood, for the public “to see her in the light that I experience her in every day,” she says. There’s her little brother, whom she describes as “my BFF ... love incarnate,” and her now-teenage cousins, who were kids when Halsey was doing mock-ups in their grandmother’s backyard. “I’m [having] difficulty expressing the words because I’m overwhelmed with emotion. This is not easy work,” says another cousin Damien Goodmon, one of the columns and CEO of Downtown Crenshaw Rising/Liberty Ecosystem. “People see the glamour

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and all the awards, but it’s hard, and I can only imagine how difficult it is for her to carry this as a person who’s not necessarily always that public. She’s been trying to do this for years — lifting up that tremendous history.”

In creating a new monument for her city, Halsey has made her loved ones landmarks in L.A.’s architectural legacy — cementing them as giants in its rich universe. “When I saw my face I was shocked,” says Rosie Lee Hooks, director of the Watts Towers Arts Center Campus. “It was so personal and me! I am not used to seeing myself so clearly. Lauren is a carrier of the culture. She is a storyteller, a griot. A documentarian, an architect, a dream-catcher. Keeper of our community and world culture. She honors all those who came before her, are here now and those to come. Right on with the right on.”

An opening block party like this one — “the block party of the year,” as one or 100 attendees put it — feels like the only appropriate way to mark the realization of a vision this singular and interconnected. And it’s a living, breathing reminder of a tenant that’s been a part of Halsey’s work from the jump: An architectural monument only becomes truly meaningful when people can see a space for themselves there. Architecture, at its best, *is* people. “Seeing yourself at that scale makes you feel many ways,” says Barrington Darius, an artist and one of Halsey’s collaborators depicted on a column. “Seen, respected and larger than life.” The party is also a slice of what “sister dreamer” will be home to every day: music, funk, fashion, art, games and space. (The three pillars of Halsey’s nonprofit Summaeverythang Community Center — art, education and wellness — will officially inform the space’s programming, including things like museum visits, film screenings, Kemetic yoga and more.)



From left to right: Cheryl Ward, Kenneth Blackmon, Monique McWilliams, Rosie Lee Hooks, Michael Towler, Dominique Moody, Andre “Sketch” Hampton, Monique Hatter, Christopher Blunt, Robin Daniels, Margaret Prescod, Barrington Darius, Damien Goodman, Londyn Garrison, Dyani Luckey, Autumn Luckey, Lauren Halsey, Emmanuel Carter.

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From left to right: Cheryl Ward, Kenneth Blackmon, Monique McWilliams.

“When I first saw myself as a sculpture in the work, I thought about representation — how it matters and what that image will sow into the fabric of our youth.”

— Monique McWilliams, partner

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Londyn Garrison.



Autumn Luckey, Emmanuel Carter, Christopher Blunt.

It's extra in all the best ways. Hosted by Watts Homie Quan, performers like Roc'co Tha Clown, and Divas and Drummers of Compton keep the energy high near the DJ booth. At one point the sound of a preschooler's voice singing "This Little Light of Mine" belts through the streets. "Let it shine, let it shine, let it *shiiiiine*." Throughout the day, people can't seem to stop reaching for means of documentation — their camcorder, digicam, phone, at one point even a palm-size notebook where a young artist from the neighborhood was sketching one of the sphinxes. The desire, or compulsion, to document this moment seems to come from a shared understanding that the opening of "sister dreamer," all of us here together, is a historic event.

Back in the park, I sit for a while and watch, thinking about how this couldn't feel more different from a gallery opening. People breathe with the art, they touch it, they feel it, they laugh with it. Goddesses on roller skates glide in buttery figure eights across the glass-fiber-reinforced concrete. Wait, is that Usher dancing with Tiffany Haddish in front of the oculus? Of course it is. Jane Fonda too. Oh, and there's Kamasi Washington, Maxine Waters, Charles Gaines and Erykah Badu.

An older Black woman saunters down Western, low and slow, holding a watermelon and mango cup in one hand and her cane in the other. She wears a matching Kelly green set and a bedazzled baseball hat that reads, "Relax, God is in control." Fly, of course, and yet another example of the brilliance and style of Black people on display today, but it also conjures something Halsey said weeks before the "sister dreamer" opening. "People don't talk about God a lot, but I'm just so grateful that God gave me the endurance to continue and push through despite whatever," Halsey says. "It's just a testimony to the power of prayer and ancestors and work ethic and alignment. So, I'm just so tired, but it's so worth it."

In line for the merch booth, sweat drips down our backs. Even in the heat, multiple people walk by wearing the "sister dreamer" X Supervsn collab from head to toe or have already pulled on their "sister dreamer" X Come Tees longsleeves they picked up from the shop, its signage reading: "Treat yaself don't cheat yaself!" An hour passes, but we're all determined to take a piece of this day home — more than a memento, but proof that we were a part of it. It is that serious.

"I want to see the art last," a musician standing behind me tells their companion.

"Is it the dessert?" the companion asks in response.

"It's just the last thing I want to think about. The last thing I want to linger on."

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