

A dense, colorful collage of objects, likely a collection of memorabilia or a display. The scene is filled with various items: a large gold figurine of a couple in the upper right, a smaller gold figurine in the center, a purple chair in the lower right, a black t-shirt with a graphic, a purple and pink mask, a small palm tree figurine, and a small sign that says "Kali Funk". The background is a mix of vibrant colors like purple, blue, pink, and gold, with many small, shiny objects scattered throughout.

Lauren Halsey we still here, there

THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES
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Lauren Halsey: The Future is Now

For her first solo museum exhibition, *we still here, there*, Lauren Halsey (b. 1987, Los Angeles) has created a fantastical installation that celebrates her home since childhood, South Central Los Angeles. This winter, Lauren and I sat down for a wide-ranging talk about the ideas and experiences that inform the project. What follows is an excerpt of our conversation. — Lanka Tattersall

Lanka Tattersall: When I first visited your studio [Fig. 1], I was struck by what an obsessive collector you are of language and materials from your neighborhood. What drives this devotion?

Lauren Halsey: When I was in the architecture program at El Camino College in Torrance [2005–2010], I started taking more art classes, and intentionally thinking about where I live. I started documenting and collecting signs in South Central mostly because I had always been obsessed with local graphics and stylistic details like penmanship, color, fonts, etc. That turned into documenting specific names of churches and businesses, titles of knickknacks, and being pretty obsessed with grammar. Some of the mom-and-pop small-business names had a Southern feel similar to my grandmother's voice. I love that, the poetry. I can think of about five businesses that end in "thangs"—"Wings N Thangs," or "Rims N Thangs." I just like that as a portal into "thangs."

A lot of it had to do with color and the freedom to experience Los Angeles, scale, outer space, car culture, church, signs, ice cream, my neighborhood's architecture in a way that was complicated and beautiful. I became obsessed with what people were making and selling on the bus, mostly because I was on it for a million hours to get to and from school. For example, a guy would walk on the bus slinging peach incense, or a guy would sell tree barks that he would paint, while someone else was selling hats with hand-painted glitter text that read "Queen" or "King." I was collecting all of this. I wanted everybody's hand in the archive I was accumulating. And at the time, I had no idea what I was doing with it. I began making these super-maximalist collages [Fig. 3].

LT: Did you make them with Photoshop?

LH: Yeah, I started them when I took my first Photoshop class at El Camino. The collages were a meditative portal to get lost in. I would kick it with my best friends on my street while I was making them. They would be freestyling, I'd be making collages, and we would talk about our dreams, whatever our goals were at the time. I would come back to them later that night and zone out to Parliament-Funkadelic, watch Sun Ra in the background, and think up these trippy, technicolor remixes of South Central. I was interested in the process of architects, how they start with a blueprint, they build the architectural model, and then construct the real thing.

LT: So, you started out making flat work without thinking about being in a space.

LH: Yeah. I thought it would always be a 2-D engagement with space-making. After I left El Camino, when I was at CalArts [in Valencia], my laptop maxed out and broke. I borrowed my father's. And when it broke as well, he said, "Well, that's it. I don't have another one." I had Sam Durant as a teacher at the time. I told him about the situation and he was like, "Well, why don't you just make it?" And I was like, "You have a good point. Okay, I'll do that."

LT: You began making sculpture by trying to make a 3-D version of the 2-D Photoshop image?

LH: Not in a way that was one-to-one, just the same type of effect. I was also trying to learn to build sculpture with my hands that was influenced by the way I've watched my father and his friends build, which is the same way I think I build—free-form, intuitive, use what you got to make what you want, and make it work. It might fail. Rebuild it. Just keep repairing, rebuilding, remixing structure.

LT: Is your dad also an artist?

LH: He's an accountant, but he's a deep thinker and intense archiver of black history.

LT: You've grown up with a sense of the importance of the archive and preserving histories.

LH: Community culture, community history, what people call themselves and their things. While I was in graduate school in Connecticut, at Yale [2012–2014], I'd come back home and notice that certain spaces, voices, and textures were disappearing. I felt an urgency to archive them because they were gorgeous and incredibly important to me.

LT: You can see that impulse in the way you accumulate materials in the *Kingdom Splurge* installations [2012–2016] that you began at Yale [Fig. 2]. There is an explosion of colors, forms, and materials that relate to South Central. Did being at Yale spur this expansion?

LH: Connecticut was kind of hard. It had nothing to do with the art school. That was as great as it could be for me. It had everything to do with the very cold weather, and feeling a bit out of place because it was nothing like LA. I would fly home to intentionally buy the materials and objects I was archiving. Or I would have my grandmother go to my favorite mom-and-pop shops and hook up with vendors at their spots to ship me boxes of materials to add to my collections.

LT: Getting materials was a way for you to stay connected with Los Angeles.

LH: Yeah, and it was the same process as the collages. I was sourcing and accumulating a tangible archive to assemble new forms—like, my ideal city blocks, and fantasy geographies with elements of real nature that I discovered



Left: Figure 1, Lauren Halsey's studio, Los Angeles, 2018, photo by Nevin Kallepalli

Right: Figure 2, Lauren Halsey, *Kingdom Splurge* (2.4.6.14), 2014, mixed media, 288 x 480 in. (731.5 x 1219 cm), Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, courtesy of the artist

Following spread: Figure 3, Lauren Halsey, *mystical mating grounds somewhere out here (kleen planet splurge riff)*, 2006, digital file, courtesy of the artist





looking through copies of *National Geographic* at my grandmother's home.

LT: In addition to the materials from home, you started thinking about natural forms. And then you decided to bring all of these things together in a kind of —

LH: Funk world.

LT: How did you decide to bring these two seemingly different things together—life in South Central and forms from nature?

LH: I was mesmerized by images of nature and wanted to create the effect and physicality of the environments for myself. It began with my bedrooms in high school, which now I look back at as my first installations. I wanted to create a safe haven for myself from the mess of the world, whether it be racism, classism, or an oppressive person. So in a way, I would build and assemble the most maximalist room out of my favorite collections just to feel okay.

LT: It sounds like the bedrooms were early architectural interventions. Architecture is a central part of your work in imaginative and visionary ways—not what one typically finds in “real” architecture. It's a defining characteristic of your MOCA installation.

LH: Definitely with the MOCA project I've been thinking about survival architecture.

LT: What is “survival architecture” for you?

LH: It's a resilient architecture built by our hands that holds our stories, our ephemera and objects, our art, our scents, our specific cultural histories, etc. We've been consistently under attack for centuries. Now we're fighting, as we always have, for space and the future of our neighborhoods. How do we refuse to be displaced, assert our autonomy, and survive? Most of my interest in architecture is in its potential to elevate the collective experience of a neighborhood. I can't think about black transcendence within South Central without thinking of our built environment and architecture first. My favorite architects were part of Superstudio. They were a group of fantasy architects from Italy in the 1960s who created the most mind-blowing, dreamy yet dystopic proposals for the built environment ever.

LT: What do you love about their work?

LH: Their proposals for architecture were so wild, so conceptually and structurally ambitious, that they can only exist as drawings. For example, they designed walking cities, where structures were living organisms, and inflatable architectures, where you would change contexts constantly. They beamed people up into architecture. A sort of Parliament-Funkadelic thing, without the cosmos. Their proposals for architecture were very inclusive for me because of their radical experimentation and approach to

scale. It included me, you, every single person in the world, and in a way that was thoughtful and beautiful.

LT: This comes back to the idea of your work as a model, or blueprint. It seems like a proposal about an imagined reality.

LH: My dream is to one day build a version of what I'm doing at MOCA as actual architecture. If not in my neighborhood and on my block, then at least somewhere. I want to expand the context of it by layering various personalities and energies onto and into the structure, by making it a habitable form that folks are living and existing within.

LT: Water is central in your installation at the museum. What does it represent for you?

LH: Peace and life. I started imagining a liquid environment of beauty water, what it would feel and sound like—water being healing, water being the life force that we need.

LT: Could you talk about the exhibition's title and what it means to you?

LH: “We still here” is sampled from a club called the Flying Fox that was one or two blocks west of Crenshaw Boulevard. Though it looked run down, boarded up, and abandoned, they had this sign up for a while that read “We Still Here.” It was gorgeous because of its simplicity and fierceness—it looks like we've left, but we still here. I love

that as an affirmation. Especially how powerful that stance is just blocks from what Crenshaw is going to become, a massive commercial development with market-rate condos and not so much affordable housing.

Then the “there” in the title is to sort of suggest whatever the destination is, whether it's San Bernardino, on the San Andreas fault line, which is a strategy—

LT: A strategy in what way?

LH: Many black and brown people are being pushed out of their neighborhoods, and they're taking secondary migrations to Victorville, Lancaster, and San Bernardino, where you can find cheaper homes and land for \$5,000, but on the San Andreas fault line. They're going to places that are going to be completely destroyed if and when there's a huge earthquake. So, *we still here, there* considers both the darkness of our time and our perseverance to continue on and to survive. We're resilient, especially as people who have survived slavery and systems meant to annihilate us. No matter where we go, we're still here, there.

LT: You have to believe that you can continue. It's a necessity.

LH: For sure. And, I totally know we're going to win. It's just a matter of time.



Left: Figure 4, Lauren Halsey's studio, Los Angeles, 2018, photo by Nevin Kallepalli



Above: Figure 5, Lauren Halsey's studio, Los Angeles, 2018, photo by Nevin Kallepalli

Right: Figure 6, Lauren Halsey working in her studio, Los Angeles, 2018, photo by Nevin Kallepalli



Lauren Halsey

we still here, there, 2018

Plaster, joint compound, portland cement, builder's paper, carpets, foam board insulation, wire mesh, wood, fountains, figurines, trophy figures, plaster busts, mannequin arms, miniature flags, hair extension packs, doll parts, fabric, artificial crystals, artificial rocks, oil containers, aerosol spray cans, signs, mirrors, glass, artificial aquarium plants, incandescent clamp lights, LED lights, compact discs, marine epoxy, resin, acrylic paint, glitter

Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

Curator: Lanka Tattersall
Curatorial Assistant: Karlyn Olvido

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Cover image: Lauren Halsey, *Kingdom Splurge (I.10.7.13)* (detail), 2013, mixed-media, 186 x 294 in. (472.4 x 746.8 cm), courtesy of the artist

Related Programs:

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Lauren Halsey in Conversation with Lanka Tattersall and Listening Session #1 with Adee Roberson
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Reading by Douglas Kearney
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MOCA Grand Avenue
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