

Brand, Madeleine, "LA artist Lauren Halsey brings organic produce to her South LA community during pandemic," *KCRW.com*, August 26, 2020



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Summaeverything is a new initiative that brings organic fruit and veggies to South LA. Photo courtesy of Lauren Halsey and David Kordansky Gallery, photography by SLH Studio.

Before the pandemic, LA artist Lauren Halsey would usually be working on an installation or sculpture. Now she's likely to be on the phone with produce suppliers, or unloading boxes from a refrigerated truck. It's not a performance art piece, but a new initiative called Summaeverything. It brings organic fruit and vegetables to where she grew up — South LA. She started it after the pandemic began, when unemployment and food insecurity became more immediate concerns for her community.

KCRW: You started Summaeverything shortly after the pandemic began. How did you come up with this idea?

Lauren Halsey: "I was sitting in my art studio, sort of dreaming up new images, new forms, excited to experiment. And it felt that something had to coexist with these new pursuits in a very tangible, immediate way that had to do with the nourishment of people. ... So I landed on food. This upcoming week will be 15 weeks into this produce distribution that we've been doing in Watts."

How does it work?

"Monday, I receive an email from Sam Rogers, who's a produce buyer for a ton of restaurants: Animal, Jon & Vinny's, Son of a Gun. She also runs the Yerba Buena farm that a lot of that produce is sourced from. She sends me a huge order and I curate what the box is.

Tuesday, my best friend drives to Oxnard to pick up the empty produce boxes and clamshell containers for the berries. Wednesday, we get to the Santa Monica farmers market, about 6:45 a.m., 7 a.m. We pick up a million pallets of the produce order, which is about \$20,000 a week. So it's a lot of stuff. We get back to the studio, we start assembling the cardboard boxes, and we set up the tables for the assembly line that happens on Thursday.

Six a.m. Thursday, we unload the refrigerated truck that we rent on Tuesday. Prep the assembly line begins at 10, ends at three. The cleaning folks come at five. Friday we're at Watts at 8 a.m. and distributing 600 to 650 of the produce boxes to folks. And we're out by about 11."

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How did you go from celebrated installation shows at The Hammer and MOCA to this totally different job? How did you know how to do it?

"A lot of cold Google and YouTube [searches on] 'how to do a produce box,' or 'organic produce South Central.' And tapping into a very close friend of mine ... to figure out the logistics of it, and how the life of produce works with refrigeration, without refrigeration. But then also having a great crew of people around me to formalize the system.

The first week we had a U-Haul truck. It was horrible, the produce was sweating. We got to the stop like five hours late. But 14/15 weeks in and we're kind of jamming and it's perfect. So just consistency and tightening up each week."

Who gets one of these produce boxes?

"Families. We've been there for 14/15 weeks, so there's this community trust. We're starting to see a lot of the same people that we can recognize as much as we can through the mask. It's a grab-and-go, sort of first-come-first-serve sort of service. When we get there, we have 100 to 150 pedestrians waiting for us. We have a million cars waiting for us, and we sort of jam through it. But you know, families of all ages from children to older folks."

Is it free?

"100%. Absolutely."

How are you paying for all of this — \$20,000 a week is a lot of produce?

"Pre-corona I intended on opening this space next door to my studio as a community center. I've been saving for that effort for at least a year with awards, grant money, and personal sales. When I realized that it was impossible in the times that we're living in to open up the community center to the public, I just started remixing the funds for the food program.

I also am receiving donations of all sizes — like I received a check in the mail the other day for \$20 from a woman that read the LA Times article. Or friends will auction off a shirt or a painting. So it's a mix of a little bit of everything, which is great. But as I'm making work during the quarantine, I'm recycling those funds back into the food program."

Tell us more about the community center and what you planned to do with it before the pandemic.

"It was going to be a community center that was about supporting all sorts of intelligence in the neighborhood, from educational support to expressive contexts like dance, music, gardening, surf camp, sport. I was hoping to open that in early fall, late summer. So when that didn't happen, I was like, 'Well, let's not sit on all the energy and the funds. Let's still apply it to folks outside of the physical space of the center.'"

Do you still want to create the center once the pandemic is on the wane?

"100%. That's where the assembly line happens right now, in the space that I've had. As soon as we pass this moment — whatever that looks like — the produce distribution will happen via the community center's garden that I'm terming 'the funk garden.' That'll have actual sculptures, but will function as a garden that we can harvest our own produce [from]. Maybe not get 600 boxes out every week, but start off 50 to 100. The interior space of the community center is more traditional as a community center."

You outlined a pretty intense week organizing the produce boxes. Do you have any time to create art?

"Luckily I'm still working with my friends and my studio system, people that I'm very close with, so there was already a collaborative sort of ethos with the art making. As we're speaking, I'm preparing for my solo booth at Frieze London. And I won't be able to go to Santa Monica's farmers market in the morning, which is my favorite thing, or do the assembly line on Thursday.

Now that there's a system, I'm able to kind of bow out and maximize my time with the art, and then jump back in. And that's the beauty of working with your friends, and other people that are just as passionate — if not more — about it than I am."

Do you get a different kind of satisfaction doing art on your own versus doing something as a group for the community? Or is it related in some way?

"They're both related. I realized I can't have one without the other. I can't propose these futures via these fantastical architectures and sculptures of and for South Central — while not having a record of service in South Central that affects folks in a very immediate way. So they have to coexist, and I feel like I've found the perfect marriage for the rest of my career."

— *Written by Erin Senne and Amy Ta, produced by Nihar Patel*