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LAUREN HALSEY LIBERATION ARCHITECTURE

BY CECI MOSS

Artist Lauren Halsey often describes her process in musical terms. Cultural artifacts—objects, signs and images from black America, with specific references to her hometown of South Central Los Angeles—are obsessively, in her words, “sampled” to create her installations and collages. Her method of sampling goes back to funk and hip-hop music, a topic that came up in our conversation. Popularized by George Clinton’s empire—Parliament, Funkadelic, P-Funk All Stars—funk music realized a vision of black liberation and empowerment through the celebratory creation of a multi-vocal, psychedelic universe. Dr. Dre’s distinctly West Coast variant of gangsta rap, g-funk, heavily drew on this sound while pushing it in a harder direction. Generating new narratives and styles out of an ad hoc archive of black popular culture, both funk and hip-hop use sampling to storytell. This technique factors heavily into Halsey’s practice. Her colorful studio is strewn with neon plexi, handsewn plastic flowers, bright beads, puffy paint bottles and rolls of reflective paper. She pastiches these items together to form her complex, ornate and immersive installations that build worlds and craft stories by reworking remnants of the past.

Halsey began her studies in architecture, not fine art. She was drawn to the hands-on and practical aspect of the discipline, as well as the acknowledgement of the politics of the built environment. After transferring into the undergraduate program at CalArts, she soon switched to making obsessively detailed digital collages combining images of black iconography, such as Grace Jones, Jordan training shoes, and b-girls, with photos from the people and places in her South Central Los

Angeles neighborhood. Meant as an aspirational fantasy for a black future, Halsey created an enormous quantity of these collages; files that she joked were so large they crashed her computer many times. The aesthetic and juxtaposition explored in these works were a crucial prelude to her installations.

As a MFA student at Yale, Halsey applied her architectural training to render these collages in physical space. While in school, she started a series entitled *Kingdom Splurge*. Her thesis, *Kingdom Splurge I* (2013), was a labyrinthine structure that unfurled and crawled up into the rafters. An homage to black owned business, she restaged a city block in her neighborhood, with local businesses such as pawn shops and discount stores recreated in miniature with hand painted signs. These buildings were positioned in different directions, and unusual perspectives, such as a bird’s eye view into a church, to refract a typical South Central street. The project was an effort to archive businesses, past and present, while bringing the viewer into a utopian space where all businesses are independent and black owned.

In interviews, Halsey cites the For Us By Us (F.U.B.U.) concept as an inspiration for this first iteration of *Kingdom Splurge*, which is a shimmering display of economic empowerment by and for the black community. This critical action is present in Halsey’s overall approach to the design of her projects, where she conceives of “building one’s space and living in it, embodying and moving through it and building it for one’s community and generating community as opposed to relying on the oppressive space-making that is forced

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on us." As such, her displays actualize the intent of F.U.B.U., fostering a type of liberation architecture not unlike the radical futuristic designs of the 1960s Italian architectural studio Superstudio, whose work Halsey admires.

While *Kingdom Splurge* occurred in a gallery setting, more recent efforts place Halsey's works back in her South Central neighborhood. In 2016, Halsey entered a float in the Kingdom Day Parade celebrating Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. *Kingdom Float* featured an enormous head with flowing pink hair and sunglasses emerging from a mountain of silver clouds. Below, Halsey's hand painted streetscape punctuated by pyramids covered the surface of the float with businesses whose names express empowerment such as "Dreams and Things Hair Salon" and "Magnificent Brothers." Much like the parade itself, *Kingdom Float* was energized and jubilant.

Halsey's latest piece in progress, *The Crenshaw District Hieroglyph Project*, also weaves the stories of South Central Los Angeles back into the community. The project began while she was a resident at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Using drywall as a surface, Halsey engraved images of Ancient Egypt with scenes from the neighborhood surrounding her studio on 125th street. During her residency, Halsey befriended people living nearby, inviting them into her studio and incorporating their lives into her sketches. Across these densely carved panels, Egypt—the original kingdom—blends together with Harlem's daily realities. The symbolism of the hieroglyph, a method of permanent writing meant to withstand the passage of time, contrasts with Halsey's use of drywall, a breakable and inexpensive building material. The choice by the artist to work with this delicate material emphasizes the precariousness of the stories inscribed on its surface, while her final presentation forefronts their resilience. For the exhibit, she mimicked a well-preserved pyramid interior by neatly covering

the walls and floors with the tiles, creating a line of equivalence between her hieroglyphs and those from Ancient Egypt.

Halsey is currently fundraising to bring a public art version of *The Crenshaw District Hieroglyph Project* to South Central Los Angeles's main thoroughfare Crenshaw Boulevard in a dedicated structure constructed by local businesses and community members. Like her gallery installations, she sees this space as an open-ended arena for the public to gather and connect. We discussed the California mural tradition, which is tied to social justice movements, as a possible reference to the piece. Halsey's piece seems to operate in that vein by encouraging a sense of empowerment through engagement with the work. Unfortunately, the artist has encountered some challenges in finding a site for the project. While there are many empty lots on the Crenshaw strip well suited to her project, Halsey had difficulties contacting the owners of these spaces, as they are predominantly owned by multinational corporations who buy and hold onto numerous plots of land in the hopes to someday turn it over for a profit. This revelation and its ties to the long game of gentrification disturbed Halsey. The globalized machinations of property ownership are blatantly split from the people who actually live in the neighborhood, making Halsey's aim to create a space commemorating the community's voice that much more powerful.

In a mock up rendering of *The Crenshaw District Hieroglyph Project* the words "We Still Here" are scrawled across the entrance. Like so much of Halsey's work, it's an affirmation. The artist's installations, collages, and structures grow out of the love and connection of her community, building a dynamic, remixed archive that lives and breathes on its own. Like an architect, Halsey's projects provide scaffolding for the experiences and histories that flow through them, forging contexts for emancipation in all of its alternate, funky forms.

Frontline of the Parade: 2014, Yale University Photo: Lauren Halsey (opposite page); The C4L ER: 2014, Yale University Photo: Lauren Halsey (p. 128) Kingdom Splurge (1, 10, 15): 2013, Yale University Photo: Romaine Ullmann (p. 133) Kingdom Splurge (2, 4, 14): 2014, Yale University Photo: Romaine Ullmann (p. 131) All images Courtesy: the artist

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