

Art World

## 2024 Was a Monumental Year for Lauren Halsey

Lauren Halsey's singular South Central-L.A. utopian vision (infused with a healthy dose of ancient Egypt) found global recognition through major exhibitions and landmark projects.

by Journey Streams  
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The artist Lauren Halsey. Photo: Eddie Salinas. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian

It has been a banner year for Lauren Halsey. The 37-year-old sculptor unveiled a series of landmark commissions and exhibitions across the globe, leaving her mark at the Metropolitan Museum, the Venice Biennale, and in two solo shows. With these major projects, Halsey has sharpened her focus on crafting site-specific utopias that spotlight her South Central L.A. community on the world stage. Whether she's constructing towering concrete columns along a waterfront path or bringing a garden into the gallery, Halsey uses psychedelic assemblage to immerse the viewer in artifacts specific to her cultural experience.

"I think of Lauren as an archivist at her core," said Antwaun Sargent, a director at Gagosian who is Halsey's point person at the gallery. Halsey joined the mega-gallery in late 2023. In March she debuted with them at their Paris outpost. In her untitled show, she presented a series of wall works dappled with dioramas of demolished landmarks in her hometown.



Lauren Halsey, 2024, installation view at Gagosian, 4 rue de Ponthieu, Paris © Lauren Halsey Photo: Thomas Lannes Courtesy the artist and Gagosian

Throughout her practice, Halsey explores the project of spacemaking to beg larger questions around materiality and belonging: how the built environment can reflect the realities of one's conditions and what strategies remain to adapt and respond. The artist's work has been celebrated profusely, highlighting an urgency in the human stakes guiding her practice and the singularity of her evolving visual language.

Closing out a year of large-scale, immersive environments, Halsey makes a more subdued appearance in the Met's group exhibition "Flight into Egypt," on view until late February. Two nine-foot-tall gypsum columns stand in the center of a gallery room, sonorous in form and dense with content. Halsey's columns are collages of landscapes and landscapes themselves, a combination of techniques that remark upon the public murals they contain, pulled from the sides of *carnicerías* and corner stores in her native L.A. Familiar streetscapes appear overwritten with patchworks of off-color paint replicated with photographic accuracy. Between local street signs and billboards, the sculptor maps the worlds she's drawn to—P-Funk, space travel, ancient Egypt. Through it all, she reveals the fertile layers of visual language embedded in her surroundings.



Lauren Halsey, *Untitled* (2024). Courtesy of the artist.

Halsey overwhelms her forms while still only providing a partial glimpse of a landscape borne by omission: the stretch of Los Angeles often in the



periphery of the public eye and civic institutions alike. South Central continues to be the driving force within her sculptural practice. I say “within” because the artist often works through a modality of enclosure, developing environments to be inhabited, objects bound to a sense of collective ownership.

In her forthcoming monograph, *emajendat*, Halsey relays her “commitment to the poetics of space.” In a conversation with Lizzie Carey-Thomas and Hans Ulrich Obrist, the curators of the Serpentine South exhibition of the same name which the book accompanies, Halsey explains, “My dream audience... is one that visits and who stays and ponders—who envisions and experiences it like a city space that is available and built for them and others.”



Lauren Halsey, *emajendat* (2024), installation view. Artwork © Lauren Halsey Photo: Hugo Glendinning. Courtesy Serpentine

Halsey intends for her installations to be sites of rest, or inquiries into space’s impact on one’s own self-perception. For this first solo show in the U.K., *emajendat*, Halsey transformed three rooms of Serpentine South—the gallery itself embedded within Kensington Gardens—into a series of “funk garden projects.” The show, on view until the end of February, is replete with live foliage, chromatic collage, and life-size figures frozen within the quotidian of a public park lined with holographic CD cladding. The maximalist psychedelia that inundates much of the sculptor’s aesthetic world is a visual language as dense as the archive she stewards.

Much of Halsey’s output is rhizomatic, the result of her penchant for remix

and self-reference. Like many of the symbols she uses, the title-phrase, *emajendat*, (it sounds like *imagine that*) appears on the surface of one of the columns currently on view at the Met. Indexical in their excess, these sculptures in turn reference Halsey's 2023 Roof Garden commission for the Met. The colossal inhabitable monument, titled *the eastside of south central los angeles hieroglyph prototype architecture (I)*, is reproduced in acrylic paint on a column's rectilinear surface.



Lauren Halsey, *Untitled* (2024). Courtesy of Gagosian.

In three dimensions, Halsey's rooftop pavilion resembled an Egyptian temple, but with concrete surfaces engraved with the lexicon of street art and emblems of Black iconography. Halsey's more recent callback, hand-painted at eye level, might appear here in retort to the vitriolic critiques her original installation garnered online. This time, the sculpture makes its return to the Met with backup. Its cameo appearance is nested among a survey of contemporary works that share Halsey's affinity with ancient Egypt as

a site of self-making. The sculptor frequently deploys Egyptian motifs in a way that foreshortens time while exalting a collective history. The Met's group show "Flight Into Egypt" underscores how these gestures fit within a larger cultural tradition. The flattened reproduction of the roof pavilion marks just one destination for the symbols collaged across the columns' surfaces.



Lauren Halsey, *emajendat* (2024). Courtesy of Serpentine.

Halsey dubbed her original rooftop installation a prototype for a reason. *eastside* was an experiment with immersive public space, both a functional artifact in its own right and an imaginary for the sites of gathering she has envisioned building in her own neighborhood since 2006. Most recently, Halsey has received a multi-year grant from the Mellon Foundation's Monuments Project, which will make possible a temporary outdoor sculpture park and community center in South Central, scheduled to open in 2026. The public project will house a series of pilot programs organized



in the interest of centering the people who have made South Central its own cultural epicenter. "It's not hyperbole to say this really is the highest achievement of her practice to date," said Sargent. The site is currently under construction, for and by her community.

In 2017, the artist made her first proposal for such a public space via Kickstarter. This earlier proposal, the *Crenshaw District Hieroglyphic Project*, hoped to inspire "productive dialogues about liberation for South Central L.A. from within," a goal illustrated with renderings of a similarly etched structure left partially blank for community members to make their own carvings. *sister dreamer* is the evolution of this initial proposal, a commitment to the long term aims of restoring a sense of agency to generations of local residents.



Lauren Halsey, *the eastside of south central los angeles hieroglyph prototype architecture (I)*, (2022), installation view at the Roof Garden Commission. ©Lauren Halsey. Courtesy of the artist; David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles/New York. Photo: Hyla Skopitz, courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

On the Met’s roof, Halsey casted South Central out of its own bounds. The sculptor describes works such as these as “fantastical spatial proposals,” environments more true than real in their reflection of the community engraved on its walls. A contemporary analog might be Kiyon Williams’s monument, *Ruins of Empire II*, installed on the Whitney Museum’s roof terrace for this year’s Biennial: a sinking neoclassical façade caked in dried mud. Where Williams figured the dilemmas of the nation-state against its own inevitable ruin, Halsey continues to draft plans for what can be built in the midst of these crumbling bastions. *eastside*’s 22-foot-tall stature may have dwarfed museum-goers, but the installation was large enough to be in conversation with nearby monuments. The pavilion was visible from Cleopatra’s Needle in Central Park, an obelisk almost as old as the park itself. Halsey echoes the ancient in an attempt to find a cosmic balance between the spatial qualities of the sanctified and the practical aspirations waiting on the ground floor.



Lauren Halsey, *keepers of the crown* (2024), installation view at the Arsenale for the 60th Biennale di Venezia. © Lauren Halsey Photo: Andrea Avezzi. Courtesy of the artist, David Kordansky Gallery, and Gagosian.

When Halsey was commissioned for this year’s Venice Biennale, she took the invitation as an opportunity to test new strategies of form, expanding on the ideas framing *eastside* while revising her methods. Six 21-foot-tall cylindrical pillars towered over the Arsenale’s waterfront, each engraved from emblazoned in the aphorisms of the culture. They were modeled after the conventions of Egypt’s New Kingdom-era, an architectural style typically reserved for structures devoted to feminine deities. At the top of each new column was the face of a woman significant to the artist’s personal



life: L.A.-based activists and artists, Halsey's own grandmother. The skyward totems bore a divine court, monuments in their own right linked by a shared sense of the transcendental.

Halsey's engravings map multiple idiosyncratic styles onto the same plane. The surfaces-in-relief espouse at once the out-of-time-ness of collective Black identification and the universal evocations that such references to the ancient seduce. Throughout their various adaptations, Halsey offers carefully constructed illustrations of contemporary folklore, preserving cultural keepsakes with a playful charm that maintains a grasp on the stakes of the artist's larger practice. Halsey's precise etchings exemplify the way the technique can be used to memorialize, celebrate, and retell the stories that define South Central—and Halsey herself.



Lauren Halsey, *keepers of the crown* (2024), installation view at the Arsenal for the 60th Biennale di Venezia. © Lauren Halsey Photo: Andrea Avezzù Courtesy of the artist, David Kordansky Gallery, and Gagosian.

Halsey's work has always been made in close proximity to her neighborhood's social life. She produces her sculptures alongside members of her community, some of whom she's known since childhood. The ethics that inspire her sculptures are true to form, appearing throughout the work's process and function.

After a year of monumental showings, Halsey's speculative constructions are finding a proper home within her local landscape in L.A. The intentions behind *sister dreamer* have been made clear by the rest of Halsey's work: hypothetical and iterative, yet an opus that edges on social practice in its unwavering focus on those who stand to gain the most from the work's realization. Sargent sees this latest endeavor as a "public offering" with tangible stakes, actualizing a long-deferred dream just blocks from where the artist grew up. Halsey's place in the contemporary canon—and in her own community—is all but etched in stone.