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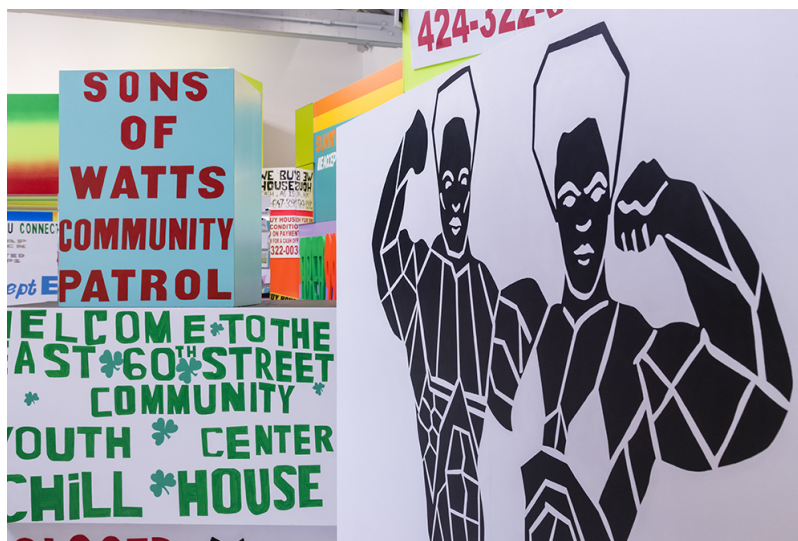
LAUREN HALSEY'S PSYCHEDELIC HOMAGE TO SOUTH CENTRAL

By Travis Diehl

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View of Lauren Halsey's exhibition, 2020, at David Kordansky.



(<https://www.artnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/LHA-Install-14.jpg>)

View of [Lauren Halsey](https://www.artnews.com/t/lauren-halsey/)'s exhibition, 2020, at [David Kordansky](https://www.artnews.com/t/david-kordansky/).

Lauren Halsey's exhibition at David Kordansky, her first at the gallery, took the form of a clamoring, abstracted cityscape: a funk apotheosis of South Central—or, as the city and its real estate developers now brand it, South Los Angeles. Rising from the prismatic silver vinyl that lined the gallery floor was a jumble of towering rectangular boxes hand-painted with the emblems of strip mall storefronts, their typical sun-bleached palettes replaced by a psychedelic one of neon colors and metallics. Three sides of *Black Diamonds* (all works 2020) riffed on polychrome murals from convenience stores and a bodybuilding gym, while the fourth depicted a globe, rotated to Africa, hovering above a gilt sphinx. In these sculptures, Halsey employed imagery drawn from both existing South Central storefront signage and historical examples found in archival photographs, celebrating the neighborhood where she was born and raised, which is now feeling the undertow of gentrification. With this in mind, the artist emphasized the area's rich vernacular culture alongside its political history in monuments like *Reparations Now + Welcome Family*, a stacked pair of horizontal boxes painted with different signs on each side. One sign bore the statement REPARATIONS NOW! IN MEMORY OF OUR ANCESTORS, accompanied by a phone number; another advertised AFFORDABLE BLACK ART.



(<https://www.artnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/LHA-Install-15.jpg>)

View of Lauren Halsey's exhibition, 2020, at David Kordansky.

Halsey, who studied architecture before turning to art, has often cited as an influence the radical Italian architecture collective Super Studio's speculative designs of the 1960s and '70s. (One 1969 proposal, *Continuous Monument*, imagined applying a uniform grid to the entire planet.) Her vision of the city in this installation was similarly speculative, distilling the urban landscape into an assortment of minimalist sculptures. In one untitled example, a simple five-foot-tall white block was decorated with a motif consisting of a gloriously manicured gold hand pinching a rose. The work was an abstraction of a salon: a mobile, exchangeable stand-in, based, like a Warhol "Brillo Box," on surface packaging.

Halsey's approach, of course, risks aestheticizing the culture of South Central in a manner actually favorable to gentrification, but she counteracted this issue in a number of ways. In certain works, such as an untitled block clad with signs for predatory houses-for-cash schemes, she directly addressed the threats posed by gentrification. In addition, she incorporated details throughout the installation—figurines, Egyptian-themed trinkets, bottled incense named for Barack Obama and Mary J. Blige—that rooted her abstractions in a specific sense of place and spoke to an interest in community preservation and building. A foil-paneled monolith decked like a public notice board, with flyers for musicians, pictures of hairstyles, and handwritten ads, was spray painted with the

statements COMMUNITY OWNED and BLK OWNED THANKS. In the exhibition's centerpiece, *Briccs 2*—a long, templelike archway with crowd-pleasing walls of mirrored tile—graffiti of tiny pyramids and phrases such as FUBU (meaning “for us by us,” borrowed from the famous hip hop clothing brand) interrupted viewers’ reflections.



(<https://www.artnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/LHA-Install-29.jpg>)

View of Lauren Halsey's exhibition, 2020, at David Kordansky.

Another, savvier strategy Halsey had for resolving the seeming contradiction of creating aesthetic objects intended to oppose cultural commodification was to impose conditions on the works' circulation, stipulating that certain pieces could be sold only to people of color or to public institutions. Thus, while she packaged the aesthetics of South Central for the seemingly placeless “anywhere” of the white cube, Halsey strove to make even this act an exercise in the ethics of community ownership.

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