

# Lauren Halsey Is Making Monuments to South Los Angeles

By Hilarie M. Sheets

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When the rapper and entrepreneur Nipsey Huse was shot to death in March outside his clothing store near Crenshaw Boulevard in Los Angeles, the world lost a Grammy Award-nominated artist and his community lost an activist and mentor. “He was South Central’s superhero,” said the artist Lauren Halsey, a 31-year-old native of South Los Angeles who knew and admired the musician, born Ermas Joseph Asghedom, two years her senior.

At Frieze New York near the north entrance to the art fair opening Thursday, Ms. Halsey is presenting “Prototype Column for tha Shaw (RIP the Honorable Ermas Nipsey Huse Asghedom) I & II” — two monumental columns 12 feet high and two feet in diameter with hieroglyphic carvings referencing the rapper’s lyrics and world in the neighborhood now known as South Los Angeles. Ms. Halsey’s project was selected from well over 100 international applications for the 2019 Frieze Artist Award, a commission for emerging artists supported by the Luma Foundation.



The new plaster that Ms. Halsey used was very difficult to carve, and forced her to learn new techniques. Photo by Lauren Halsey, via David Kordansky Gallery, LA

“Prototype is not a word she’s using lightly,” said Courtney J. Martin, curator of the project and one of the selecting jurors who was recently named director of the Yale Center for British Art. “There are people in her community who stand up for things that she sees as models for how things should work.”

The columns are also prototypes for elements of an ambitious public project Ms. Halsey intends to build in South Los Angeles as a gathering space and a way to honor her community. She is negotiating with the city of Los Angeles on a proposal that includes plans for a white mausoleum-type structure with seating and planters and covered in her contemporary form of hieroglyphics. She sees it as a living archive of the people, businesses, culture and beauty of her neighborhood, rapidly changing and being erased with gentrification.



Ms. Halsey is negotiating with the city of Los Angeles on a proposal that includes plans for a white mausoleum-type structure with seating and planters and covered in her contemporary form of hieroglyphics. Photo by Jeff McLane, via David Kordansky Gallery, LA

“In my dream world, there would be 15 to 20 of these columns — 30 feet tall and 5 to 6 feet in diameter — that would coexist with the permanent structure and that people would move through like a corridor,” Ms. Halsey said in a telephone interview. She used the Frieze commission as an opportunity to experiment with a new durable industrial plaster that was incredibly difficult to carve into but that forced her to learn new techniques. “I’m really happy with the results,” she said, “and now that I have the prototypes, I can share this with more fabricators around the country.”

Ms. Halsey, who studied architecture at her local community college, first envisioned some kind of public project as an art student at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia. “I would take the bus down these main boulevards from my grandmother’s home to Cal Arts and started thinking deeply about activating these vacant lots because there are so many,” she said.



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After receiving her M.F.A. from Yale in 2014, Ms. Halsey was an artist in residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Long interested in Parliament Funkadelic musicians who appropriated Egyptian archetypes into their cosmologies, she was seeing vendors on 125th Street selling scale models of Pharaonic architecture and then visiting the Metropolitan Museum to view actual ruins from ancient Egypt covered with paintings and reliefs.

“I thought I could sample the function of the hieroglyph — the pharaohs’ record — and remix it into contemporary neighborhood poetics and news to describe this moment for people,” said Ms. Halsey, who showed her initial experiments with carving on gypsum panels and painting colorful portraits on columns in 2015 at the Studio Museum.



Ms. Halsey's architectural prototype last year for the Hammer Museum's biennial. Photo by Brian Forrest, via the Hammer Museum and David Kordansky Gallery, LA

Last year for the Hammer Museum's biennial "Made in L.A.," the artist made another architectural prototype that was installed on the terrace. Visitors could enter a large-scale open-air pavilion built from carved gypsum panels that echoed both Egyptian and Modernist structures. It was a way for Ms. Halsey to think through questions of public access and practicalities of how her future South Los Angeles monument might function outside.

"The hieroglyphic imagery is both uplifting and upsetting and speaks to gun violence, police violence, gentrification, economic insecurity — all things that we're having to address both at a local level in L.A. and nationally," said Anne Ellegood, a co-curator of the biennial. "Lauren manages to strike a really compelling balance between the fact that communities like hers are being challenged by these societal pressures and yet there's so much positive occurring in those spaces as well." The artist was awarded the \$100,000 Mohn Award in conjunction with the museum's biennial.

Ms. Halsey will have her first exhibition at the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles in early 2020. She has asked the dealer to contribute the proceeds from the eventual sale of her Frieze commission to a workers' center in South Los Angeles. She plans to employ carpenters and apprentices there once she gets the green light from the city for her civic proposal "so it becomes a small alternative development project," she said.

She also intends to throw open the doors of her Los Angeles studio for six months and invite people to carve their own stories on the panels for her architectural structures or drop off images for others to incorporate in designs.

"It will be a collaboration with me and the people within the neighborhood," Ms. Halsey said. "We're all authoring narratives around what it means to be alive now."

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