

## Lauren Halsey's *pride n progress thang*, 2024 – by Robeson Taj Frazier

Los Angeles can sometimes feel like a blur. An overwhelming whirlwind of people, buildings, tensions, and contradictions squeezed into a never-ending grid of city blocks. Compounded by stark conditions and structures of poverty, power, and state violence.

Yet what can be overlooked in L.A.'s thick haze and geography of paradoxes is the depth and singularity of specific strips, businesses, neighborhoods. Colloquial symbols and codes of meaning and fellowship. Hood vocabularies. The everyday contexts and relationships that shape a people's poetics and their creative life-strategies. Or so says Lauren Halsey.

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Halsey's *pride n progress thang*, 2024, is an eight-foot-tall wall-mounted foil work of mixed-media assemblage that takes viewers on a ride down memory lane via the Eastside of South Central Los Angeles. The work features a mixture of photographs, ephemera, found objects, and miniatures composed by Halsey. These are materials that Halsey and her community of family and friends have gathered from personal collections, swap meets, yard sales, community-run vendor markets, street-corner walls, light poles, Goodwill, scrapyards, and archival institutions.

Halsey uses the affordances of collage – overlapping, overlaying, fragmentation – to place the neighborhoods of her upbringing and their vernacular architecture and expressive cultures into a dynamic exchange with memory and history. Communities like Manchester Square, Vermont Knolls, Avalon Gardens, Green Meadows, Watts, and West Compton. These neighborhoods become portals and memory repositories for Afro-diasporic cultural life and U.S. Black history.

What we also get is an alternative mapping of South Central L.A. One that treats the region not as a monolith or as indecipherable and ruled by turbulence. But rather as an ensemble of villages and human relations whose histories and codes of fellowship and affiliation require a different framework, an alternative paradigm of arrangement and design.

In *pride n progress thang*, Halsey positions South Central businesses, institutions, public spaces, and people as critical nodes in the life arc of these neighborhoods. Businesses like Top Flight Exotics, Deryl with Curl's Hand Car Wash, and Vanessa's Positive Energy. Adult entertainment clubs like The Right Track and Studio East/Club Xzotic. The basketball court near her grandmother's home that the L.A. Clippers renovated as part of the team's 1990s' rebranding efforts, a recreational area where Halsey and other children fashioned hoop dreams of getting paid and getting their families out of the hood.

Riding public transportation and maneuvering around the city shaped Halsey's early creative practice. "Seeing my favorite avenues and boulevards at a very slow pace, over and over and over again. I would document the exterior of the block in drawings and on my flip phone's camera," she explains. "I was mapping the neighborhood and making these aspirational blueprints of what I hoped to present as a remix of certain businesses, forms and geographies."

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Halsey, consequently, also reconstructs certain institutions as cardboard house miniatures. Spaces like the church her family helped to found, a neighborhood minimart and tax preparation office, and “Dis N Dat” variety store. Halsey depicts each one as a white structure. It is a color choice that seems to cite the popular imaginary of *the White House*, yet which re-scripts it within a color symbolism derived from Yoruba, Maasai, and Ancient Egyptian cultures where white is a sign of sacredness, purity, and the transcendent nature of life. In so doing, Halsey frames these South Central L.A. institutions as extensions of African traditions and as spaces that truly serve the community’s different and changing needs.

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In using resources from formal archival institutions alongside materials from her family and community, Halsey cultivates a counter-archive – a repository of history, memory, and imagination that contests and reconfigures knowledge and the historical record. It, additionally, compels us to confront the simultaneity of lived realities and the contradictions of the archive.

So, a photograph of Fawn, Halsey’s aunt, and Shanae, Halsey’s cousin, as children sitting atop a bicycle shares space with pictures from friends’ cameras, album covers, magazines, and the treasured possessions and memorabilia of people whom Halsey may never meet or know. Halsey describes it as “layering the chronologies I’ve been a part of, from childhood to now, with ones I’ve inherited via narrative and images. And making sense of it.” The counter-archive – institutional, communal, and personal – thus becomes Halsey’s building blocks for communicating intersections and tensions, as well as intimacies between past and present.

Take for example the image in the top right of a man carrying a child, the latter wearing a blue baseball cap turned backward. This photograph was taken at the 1966 Watts Summer Festival, an annual concert and multiday series of events organized in the aftermath of the 1965 Watts Uprisings. The festival was aimed at stimulating racial solidarity and, as the festival’s subheading articulated, honoring Black people’s “pride and progress.”

The festival’s imagined racial unity and spirit of uplift, however, is juxtaposed against other visuals. Photographs like that on the bottom right showing a man wearing a Nation of Islam medallion necklace, his hands outstretched, and directly underneath, a photograph of another man wearing a Charlotte Hornets cap, gun in hand, his t-shirt reading “By Any Means Necessary.” These are photographs from the 1992 Los Angeles Uprisings, the first image revealing a community member distraught over the uprising’s violence and destruction of property, and the latter image showcasing a business owner who stands at guard to protect his South Central car wash and auto repair shop.

Within these three collaged images is a tension. An acknowledgement that the blueprints for Black people’s freedom dreams can’t avoid America’s crumbling foundations and the cracks and fissures of Black intracommunal life; those historical and present-day

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forms of trauma, violence, and oppression that we are subjected to, which we commit against one another, and of which we are complicit.

Halsey's commitment to excavating these tensions takes on its most nuanced charge in her representations of gang life. Throughout *pride n progress thang* are depictions of different L.A. gang sets. Grape Street Crips, Nickerson Garden's Bounty Hunter Bloods, West Side Tragniew Park Crips, Ghetto Boys Gang, Crenshaw Mafia Gangsters. But Halsey's choice of imagery contrasts with the portrayal of these groups that has pervaded mainstream news-media and global popular discourse. Gang members are shown as children and teens, smiling, laughing, posturing against walls, arms wrapped around a toddler, posing with muscles on display. And most powerfully, as members of different sets, backs against one another, hands interlocked in an embrace of recognition, camaraderie, and solidarity.

That Halsey highlights these people with care and love is significant. She maintains that it is vital to move beyond the usual tropes of gang affiliation and urban violence. Or as she frames it, "Taking out the hyper-violence that I don't always see reflected in these community based relations." *pride n progress thang*, instead, communicates a different narrative – one of "knowing men and women, deep in a gang context, but who spew love and who aren't these killing machines, if even that."

Furthermore, Halsey's decision to depict several gang members in glossy, shiny ways counters hypermasculine constructions and representations of Black manhood and gang affiliation. See the two images of the satiny, shirtless, muscular man who poses in the center-right of Halsey's composition. His facial expression and body language don't communicate intensity or violence but seem more akin to the "beefcake" images found on the covers of vintage American muscle magazines – cultural products that were, at one point in time, one of the few ways available for U.S. gay men to express and affirm their identity and community. Halsey's incorporation of such images queers the subjects' masculinity because it highlights, as she puts it, "the possibility of boyhood, manhood without the veneer of hardness." She, furthermore, congeals that possibility into the shininess of hypervisibility; she endows it with the reverence and endurance that accompanies gloss. "The Black men and boys that I know in a familial sense, in a friendship sense, in a deep way," she explains, "It is a lot more complex than "I'm hard." It's important and it's part of the record too."

Nonetheless, Halsey acknowledges the limits of this depiction, and the tensions inherent within her representations of intergang reconciliation and gang masculinities. "Because of turf and boundaries," Halsey admits, "Putting the gangs in proximity is something that can't happen so easily in the real world." She builds on this point when discussing masculinity. "Men that I'm very close to in my life, who have to perform masculinity. I know them as 'other,'" Halsey states. "They insist that they can't be as soft and colorful and vibrant as they are with me because they *have to* walk to the bus-stop, they *have to* engage with someone at the liquor store or the fish spot and they don't know who's coming in. They *have to* exist in South Central."

Still, myth, fantasy, and speculation are instruments that Halsey wields to illuminate hidden registers of meaning and correspondence, and alternative constructions of the past, present, and future. Halsey asserts that assembling fantastical worlds is part of "the

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armor” that Black people have developed “to speak brilliantly [about ourselves]... because the world is so shitty to us.”

Consider Halsey’s iconography of the cosmos, spaceships, intergalactic exploration, and alternate realities – allusions of flight and the fugitive capacities of Black art, Black expression, Black life. Find all the people and figures who are gesturing and running and moving and soaring; where hands are clasped together as if in prayer or worship, or arms are outstretched and raised in motion, or legs are bent in preparation for liftoff, or where the person or figure is airborne. Gestures that both literally and physically extend beyond the speaker; which connect them to, and position them within, other dimensions. These are a nod to Afro-diasporic folktales of Black people flying and escaping their circumstances. Black practices and tactics, that we might refer to, à la Curtis Mayfield, as *super fly*.

Alternative pathways and forms of expression and movement are ubiquitous in Halsey’s composition. Count the number of musicians. Stevie Wonder, Parliament, Sly and the Family Stone, Ramsey Lewis, MC Eiht, Tha Dangla, Terrace Martin. Testimony to Black music’s liberatory capacities and ability to teleport people to other worlds. Next, locate the photographs of the back of children’s heads. Who shaped the stars that adorn this child’s fade? And, in the adjacent galaxy, whose hands and fingertips double-dutched these strands of hair into spiral shapes? Who furnished us with a braided reminder of the cosmic Black continuum? Of how we thread and pull together disparate strands into new configurations? Of how we knit new forms of love, kinship, and community?

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*pride n progress thang* ultimately positions remembrance and the stewardship of vernacular traditions and codes as extensions of worldbuilding and fantastical flight, as part and parcel of people and places in dialogue and in service to one another. And the artwork commemorates those who have dedicated their lives to this and who have struggled to defend Black life in South Central amid forces of injustice, displacement, and gentrification.<sup>1</sup>

People like street dance legend Thomas “Tommy the Clown” Johnson, an ex-convict turned dancer. For over twenty years, Tommy’s dance crews have been a source of community entertainment and joy, well known for their “hop out” dance performances and for providing dancers from different neighborhoods with a “hood pass” that enables them to transgress boundaries of turf and gang affiliation. Or Margaret Prescod, the activist and radio host who throughout the 1980s-2000s drew attention to the disappearance and murder of Black women in South Los Angeles.

Or Vanessa “Bling Bling Dancer” Bailey, a seventy-six year old retired teacher who currently teaches dance and hula-hoop classes at her business, Vanessa’s Positive Energy. Located on Manchester Boulevard, just off Normandie Avenue, Vanessa’s Positive Energy is a community-driven intergenerational space that offers dance and fitness instruction to people of all ages, including elders.<sup>2</sup> Mrs. Bailey’s business holds a special spot for Halsey,

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even though she has never been inside. Halsey divulges, “I’m a Manchester kid. I’ve been driving up Manchester my whole life.... Her [Vanessa’s] door is always open. I’ve seen when she is closing, as people are pouring into the street and these nuanced beautiful moments take shape. And it always feels so energetic and loose and fun.” “Some of my favorite businesses don’t exist anymore,” Halsey laments. “Part of me wanting to document Vanessa’s Positive Energy – and not just the building itself or the architecture – was that I love the experience of driving by it at night. Outside the building is this glowing sign of Vanessa; you know, like a Black woman’s portrait that affirms positivity in a place that is supposed to be, quote-in-quote, the antithesis of that. And then to also see – if you’re stuck in traffic and you’re looking inside the building – the kids dancing or older people moving.”

Bailey, Prescod, Johnson, and others are reminders that even amid L.A.’s increased cost of living and real estate development efforts to transform South Central, certain traditions and codes and life-strategies endure. “You see “my hood” tagged all over L.A.,” Halsey says. “Authoring or even suggesting ownership, whether it’s poetically or not, I love that. In a space where literally we’re being erased, and moved around, and deleted...”

MY HOOD

SMO  
KEW  
EED

WESTERNS FINEST

LODA

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<sup>1</sup> Also see Halsey’s forthcoming work, “sister dreamer, lauren halsey’s architectural ode to tha surge n splurge of south central los angeles,” discussed in Shawn Ghassemitari, “Lauren Halsey to Open a Sculpture Park in South Central, LA,” Hypebeast, May 20, 2024, <https://hypebeast.com/2024/5/lauren-halsey-southcentral-los-angeles-sculpture-park-preview>

<sup>2</sup> On Vanessa’s Positive Energy, see Ryan Blackshere Vargas, “Hula Hooping senior in South LA uplifting community,” Spectrum News 1, Aug. 6, 2021, <https://spectrumnews1.com/ca/la-west/humaninterest/2021/08/06/hula-hooping-senior-in-south-la-uplifting-community>

