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CASE STUDY

Food for Thought

Lauren Halsey's Summaeverythang community center adds to the social fabric of L.A.

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Artist and activist
Lauren Halsey,
founder of
Summaeverythang.

ONE SATURDAY MORNING this fall, signs on neon poster board circled a parking lot near Crenshaw Boulevard and 54th Street in South Central Los Angeles bearing handwritten messages: "Support Black Workers," "Fresh Fruit," "Fresh Produce." In a corner of the lot, cardboard boxes filled with food sat at the ready as masked volunteers directed traffic and loaded offerings into cars. In addition to fruits and vegetables, each box contained a packet of information about jobs and professional training opportunities assembled by the Los Angeles Black Worker Center, which had collaborated with the newly founded artist-run project Summaeverythang. "These boxes," said Lauren Halsey, "I thought we could use them as vessels to communicate."

Halsey, an artist whose vibrant architectural installations celebrate the places, people, and histories closest to her, had started Summaeverythang a few months earlier to distribute quality produce boxes to South Central communities that need them. The week I spoke with her, Halsey's team of collaborators had packed some 1,200 boxes, half to give away at their regular spot outside the Nickerson Gardens projects in Watts and the other half to be distributed outside the Black Worker Center. Summaeverythang wasn't mentioned on any of the signs or named on the boxes—no passerby would necessarily have known that Halsey's team was involved. "There's so much collaboration behind the scenes that I don't think has to be announced," Halsey said.

Initially, Summaeverythang was meant to function as a gathering place of a kind Halsey began imagining as a student at El Camino Community College. When a space next to her studio became available last year, she leased it to put her plan into action. "I thought it would be a space to engage with the neighborhood, with children, and it can develop as a traditional—but experimental—community center," Halsey said.

She imagined programming that could shift to meet the needs of neighbors in a



Summaeverythang

Left, Outside Summaeverythang food distribution program, Watts, June 2020.

Bottom Left, Produce box assembly line at Summaeverythang Community Center, South Central Los Angeles, July 2020.

Bottom Right, Summaeverythang's organic produce box, which are distributed to families in Watts and South Central Los Angeles.



Photos Courtesy David Kordansky, Los Angeles.

space that could be a learning center, a recording studio, a community garden, and lots of other things in between. The name signals the open-endedness of Halsey's vision: "I say 'Summaeverythang' to a certain person and they can imagine what that means—they can summon what can happen," she said.

When the coronavirus crisis forced L.A. into lockdown, Halsey realized that opening a public space would be problematic. But she still wanted to help, especially given how hard the pandemic hit Black and Brown communities in already under-resourced South Central. So she decided to distribute produce boxes that

she would assemble herself to ensure that people received the best—an initiative for which Summaeverythang pays upwards of \$16,000 per week through donations and Halsey's own funds. A number of her collaborators grew up in the Nickerson Gardens projects in Watts, so they picked the area as the hub. This became a way to give back, and as Halsey put it, "to show that we don't always have to wait for an outside resource to be the savior."

THE NOTION OF COMMUNITY HAS been central to Halsey's art from the start. Her earliest museum exhibitions featured *The Crenshaw District*

Hieroglyph Project Prototype Architecture, an installation that archives stories and experiences from South Central. The work first appeared at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2015, after Halsey spent time in the artist-in-residence program there, and again at the 2018 Made in L.A. biennial at the Hammer Museum. In all its forms, it aims to serve as an immersive environment built with hand-carved gypsum tiles and incorporating portraits of friends and family, replicas of signage that caught Halsey's eye, and images of low-riders or children playing basketball. Halsey refers to installations of the sort as "prototypes," because the real thing—still



Urban Spelunking

View of the exhibition "Lauren Halsey: we still here, there," 2018, at MOCA Grand Avenue, Los Angeles.

“I say ‘Summaeverythang’ and they can imagine what that means.”

in the planning stages—is meant to be a collaborative public artwork situated in the Crenshaw District of South Central. “My interest was in wanting to build an architecture with other folks, wanting to collaborate,” Halsey said.

She launched a Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign for the project in 2017, raising more than \$18,000 before she received the Hammer Museum’s \$100,000 Mohn Award, given to one artist in each iteration of Made in L.A. As interest in Halsey’s work has grown, she’s made a point always to discuss community in interviews, emphasizing that her work is not exclusively, or even primarily, for the mainstream art world. “For me,” she said,

“it’s as important to be asked ‘what did you think of this show you did at MOCA?’ as ‘what are you and your friends and partner and grandmother and little cousin building in South Central right now?’”

Since 1927, Halsey’s family has lived in South Central, a vast region comprising 28 neighborhoods. (In 2003, the L.A. City Council voted to rename the area South L.A., but many have dismissed this effort as an attempt to erase a history of systemic racism that has long impacted the people who live there.) Halsey grew up around artists like Dominique Moody, who builds nomadic sculptures that serve as gathering places, and Ramsess, a self-described community artist who

uses vibrant figurative murals, fabric, and stained-glass patchworks to record the stories of his neighbors, and figures and events from Black history. For years, until high rents forced Ramsess to move, he occupied a storefront studio on the same block as the Brockman Gallery, founded in 1967 to exhibit artists of color, and the World Stage, a beloved music venue. Of the way that Moody and Ramsess influenced her conception of her practice early on, Halsey said, “I don’t know that it would be in my bones without them.”

Emmanuel Carter, who works in Halsey’s studio and has known her since they were teenagers, remembers conversations about a community center and garden beginning in earnest a few years ago. Halsey expressed a desire to contribute to their community in measurable ways, and Carter agreed about the importance of such a gesture. “I have the same feeling,” he said, “and I thought it was a very good idea.” Since it officially launched in May, Summaeverythang has been a family-and-friends affair with an aim to keep the team at its core a close-knit group. Carter helps with the logistics, as does

Totems

Right, view of Halsey's installation *The Crenshaw District Hieroglyph Project (Prototype Architecture)*, 2018, in "Made in L.A." at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.

Viewing Room

Below, *land of the sunshine wherever we go*, 2020.



carpenter Breonte Davis, who used to play basketball with Halsey on the block where they grew up.

Operations behind the produce donations were difficult to organize at first, when they realized no ordinary U-Haul would work—they needed a refrigerated truck. They also had to learn the ins and outs of ordering produce in bulk from the Santa Monica Farmer's Market, where to get the right kind of boxes and plastic clamshells for fruit, and then how to pack and unpack hundreds of boxes efficiently. "It looks easy," Davis said, "but it's not. All this is brand-new."

As the project began to find a routine in the fall, Halsey would order the produce on Sunday night or Monday morning. On Tuesday, Carter drives up to Oxnard to collect materials to help distribute it. On Wednesday, Halsey and her partner, Monique McWilliams, along with Carter, Davis, and other longtime friends, arrive at the market by 7 a.m. to collect their purchases. On Thursday, more friends and family gather to assemble the packages. And on Friday, they deliver about 600 boxes to the pickup lot near Nickerson Gardens—usually finding 150



to 200 people already waiting for them. Sometimes, as with the Los Angeles Black Worker Center collaboration, they do another delivery over the weekend.

They plan to continue distributing produce for as long as the pandemic persists. But slowly, as it becomes safe to gather again, Summaeverythang will move toward what Halsey initially intended: an open-ended, flexible space that shifts to meet the needs of the communities around it. Produce donation will likely continue long into the future, though maybe at a smaller scale—and Halsey hopes that fruits and vegetables will increasingly come from what she's been calling "the funk garden," a yard beside the center where sculptures and plants will coexist.

In the last five years, as construction on the Crenshaw subway line nears

completion and the city prepares for the arrival of the 2028 Olympics, community activists have worked on actionable plans to prevent and resist gentrification by helping communities in and around the area. The Crenshaw Subway Coalition, which began hosting gentrification education classes in 2018, has been organizing an effort to buy back the Baldwin Hills Mall on Crenshaw Boulevard. The newly founded Crenshaw Dairy Mart supports artists living and working in the area while also advocating for prison abolition and economic justice.

Summaeverythang contributes to these efforts. As Halsey said, "I just thought, even early on in school, that it wasn't enough to represent love and imaginative space through art—that it would also be about something tangible." ■