

# COM- MUNITY

IN CONVERSATION WITH  
ALICE GRANDOIT-ŠUTKA AND ISABEL FLOWER

PORTRAIT  
BY TEXAS ISAIAH

# LAUREN HALSEY

## **ALICE GRANDOIT-ŠUTKA**

For *Deem*'s second issue, we're exploring alternatives to contemporary pedagogy. We're asking what types of community design enable and encourage learning, as well as thinking about education as a tool for building networks that support both self-sufficiency and solidarity. We're honored to be in conversation with you to anchor the issue. As both a multi-generation South Central Los Angeles native and a student of architecture, you have important personal and academic connections to the power of place. How does this inform your worldview?

## **LAUREN HALSEY**

I'm consciously and constantly negotiating both fields to frame and remix poetic and tangible space both inside and outside of my art practice. A lot of the inspiration for my mindset has to do with claiming for myself an imaginative headspace I learned via Parliament Funkadelic as a pre-teen. I became a hardcore "Funkateer" as a teenager and by adulthood I was dreaming up future possibilities that revolved around community building, equity, love, neighborhood pride—all things Funk. That is the texture of who I am. Had I become a math teacher or nurse, I would still work and move in the same way. Now that I'm working in the sphere of art, I'm taking those same cues and intentionally creating what I hope are transcendent and empowering spaces. No matter the context, I'm always thinking about what returns and gets redistributed to my neighborhood. There's always a community ethos. I don't see art and architecture as separate from the community. They're sort of a cause and effect.

"Lauren Halsey,"  
David Kordansky  
Gallery, Los Angeles,  
January 25–March 14,  
2020. Installation view,  
Courtesy of David  
Kordansky Gallery,  
Los Angeles.  
Photography by  
Jeff McLane.



**ISABEL FLOWER**

When you were a child, what did you want to be when you grew up? What prompted you to get a degree in architecture?

**LAUREN**

I wanted to be a basketball player. I wanted to be Lisa Leslie. I wanted to play for the LA Sparks. That was my entire world. My father sent me to an academic school that didn't have basketball—I mean, we had a team, but it was as recreational as it could have been. It wasn't competitive at all. He put me on AAU teams and I played parallel with my cousin, who ended up going to the NBA. I was like, "I'm on the way." Then, this horrible thing happened

between a coach and another player that caused Adidas to shut down the team that I was on, destroying my chance of being recruited by my dream school at the time—the University of Tennessee—to play for Pat Summitt and the Lady Vols. I took my first art class in the 12th grade because I needed something expressive and I was no longer able to express myself through my body and basketball.

After high school, I went to an amazing community college in LA called El Camino. I took architecture because it was recommended to me by Dominique Moody, an incredible artist who was close friends with my aunt. We were having a conversation and I was like, "I don't know what to do with my life. Basketball isn't going to happen." She asked me, "What inspires you?" I said something







## “THE WORK CAN’T JUST BE REPRESENTATIONAL,

Above left: Photograph by Texas Isaiiah.

Right: views of Summaeverythang community center in South Central LA. Image courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery. Photography by Allen Chen.

along the lines of “space,” because, as I said earlier, experiencing life through the lens of Funkadelic and the ethos of being a Funkateer meant constantly remixing space in my head in the pursuit of pure and total freedom. I took an architecture class and it was really empowering. In the program, we spent several years proposing and drawing up spaces and then actually building them with our peers in collaborative design/build courses with students in the construction department. That was huge for me.

Then, one day, during my second or third year at El Camino, I was walking with my friend Jesus through campus to the parking lot and we passed an art class happening in the print-making room. I decided to enroll in the class because of the wild color palettes I could see through the window. There was so much freedom because, well, it’s art! My teacher, Paul Gellman, allowed me to take the blueprints I was doing on the other side of campus in my architecture program and bring them to the print-making processes to sort of funkify them and loosen them up. That became my cheat code. I was remixing geography fantastically. I was combining *National Geographic* magazines that I inherited from my grandmother with these maximalist, syrupy geographies Parliament proposed in their funk operas, album covers, songs, etc. That was the beginning of my palette. It was about density, maximalism, and futurism—collapsing all of

Previous spread:  
"Lauren Halsey," David  
Kordansky Gallery,  
Los Angeles, January  
25–March 14, 2020.  
Installation view,  
Courtesy of David  
Kordansky Gallery,  
Los Angeles.  
Photography by  
Jeff McLane.

Below, left to right:  
Marcus Daniels,  
Catrina Mendoza,  
and Rodrick Jonson.  
Image courtesy of  
David Kordansky  
Gallery. Photography  
by Allen Chen.

these compositionally, as well as the Los Angeles aesthetic that I'm part of, and others that I've inherited from my father, such as idiosyncratic nods to ancient Egyptian mythology.

From there, I transferred to architecture school at California College of the Arts. I was there for a year or two, but my coursework quickly went from being about the practical services of architecture to proposing far out forms that didn't tie back to any context around reality, as far as demographics, class, race, or even budget. I soon realized that architecture in the traditional sense wasn't for me. I went back to El Camino and started thinking about how I could appropriate architectural processes to create sculptures and installations. But one of my goals for the next five years is actually to produce an architecture—not one animated by an art context—an actual architecture on a city block. Maybe one day I'll go back to school for it, if I can get in.

#### ALICE

Thank you for sharing this. We've been lucky to have had the chance to experience your work in person. Of course, so much is informed by your experiences being born and raised in Los Angeles. How has gentrification in LA affected your life, and how has that perhaps translated into work that challenges ideas about equity and the distribution of space?

#### LAUREN

I understand that cities change, and I understand that the personality of neighborhoods shifts. But the overflow of this out-of-control, new infrastructure is transforming and reorganizing the city and is the sum of a

## AND IT CAN'T JUST BE PERFORMATIVE."



totally different class experience. It's horrible. Now folks who are from South Central and other Black and brown areas are taking these second migrations far outside of Los Angeles, to Victorville, San Bernardino, etc. It's so violent.

I have no intention of leaving. Because of that, I feel that it's not responsible, or even enough, for me just to reference South Central's past, present, and future in the work. If the work is going to exist outside of my home, my studio, my garage, whatever, then there has to be some sort of proposal or activation for community building in a way that offers and distributes resources 24/7/365 in real time and at no cost. The work can't just be representational, and it can't just be performative. The result, the cause and effect, has to be something tangible. This starts at the base level with who I work with—who I hire for the community center, who I hire as assistants, who I hire as subcontractors. At the minimum, I must recycle dollars back into the neighborhood, into family businesses, into people. My long term goal is one day to use those dollars to redistribute land, housing, community centers, and grocery stores back to the hood via community land trust models I've been studying.

That includes the dream of one day building the architecture for what I am describing. This will mean tapping back into the LA Black Worker Center and a ton of folks and frameworks that I have deep relationships with,









and then hiring on a large scale for real construction projects. In the meantime, I'm doing what I can with Summaeverythang community center to empower who's here already and, hopefully, beyond just employment, to give folks tangible resources, mutual aid, opportunities for learning, and beautiful experiences that feed energy back into the people and contexts that deeply inspire me. I know all of these gestures aren't going to solve gentrification, but I'm trying my best. That's all I can do, you know?

#### ISABEL

We'd love to hear more about Summaeverythang, which you founded in 2019 as an extension of your art practice. How has the community center evolved since the arrival of COVID?

#### LAUREN

I joined a gallery to do this work. There would be no other way for me to do it at the scale that I want to. Teaching, for example, won't land me there. My mother is a teacher but there are limitations with funds. I had to figure out how to monetize my passion while still maintaining a sense of autonomy as soon as I walk in the door. Some of this I only do so that I can also do my dream work, which is my community work.

The community center is two doors down from my studio. Pre-COVID, I had been keeping it insular. I was working on bringing people from the neighborhood in to run it, to coordinate, to help facilitate. I was saving money, writing grant and award proposals, building hype. Outside of form, my sculpture practice is about trying to create as many funding opportunities for the community center as possible. I had originally planned for it to open in the late summer/early fall of 2020. Out of the gate, and inspired by my little cousins, the first few programs were going to revolve around helping kids with their homework through one-on-one tutoring, studying, and group learning—essentially an after-school program.

Then I talked to my close friend Six Sev, a tight rapper and activist who is based in Leimert Park but originally from Crenshaw. As there are a few office spaces within the community center, the new goal became creating a high-level music studio and yearlong residencies for musicians, vocalists, poets, and performers in the neighborhood to make projects using the equipment and space free of charge.

I had a lot of plans for rolling out these kinds of programs but, unfortunately, due to COVID, any kind of community gathering is a risk. I had to figure out how to remix the energy, the morale, and the funds to do something that would still be of service outside of the building. I landed on a food program because South Central and Watts are already, in my opinion, in a hunger crisis, and I knew that the resources would never land in the way that they needed to. Today is actually the first Friday, for the past twenty-nine weeks, that we've taken a break, because COVID is surging. Otherwise, every Friday we've been distributing organic produce boxes, hygiene kits, art kits, and sometimes fish, via Crenshaw Dairy Mart. Last week we had turkeys. It's been amazing.

The ethos of promoting food security is a big part of the community center. I'm looking forward to building a community garden in the parking lot in the upcoming months. We might not be able to do 600 boxes a week, that requires acres of land, but we'll be able to harvest whatever we can. At the minimum, we can do fifty boxes per week for the rest of the community center's life, and hopefully for the rest of my life. I'm learning as I'm going. I'm learning with my friends. We're freestyling it and it feels really beautiful.



Above, left to right: Christopher Brown and Breonte Davis. Left: Summer Humes. Images courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery. Photography by Allen Chen.

Opposite page: Lauren Halsey by Texas Isaiah.





## “I CAN MAKE MY ART AND BE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD,

### ALICE

We're amazed by the work that you're doing, and the need to design hyperlocal food systems was actually a prominent topic in our last issue. You are juggling so much: what have been your biggest challenges in running Summaeverythang, in addition to the more traditional elements of your art practice?

### LAUREN

Practical problems. I sometimes enjoy the community center more than I do my studio because there's no audience. All we have to do is our best for our people. What's been hard is the practical stuff, like figuring out how to do something then realizing you wasted money in the process. For example, with the food program, for the first few weeks we really didn't know what we were doing. I was searching "how to make a produce box" and "how to do an assembly line" on YouTube. Now we have a formalized system. We could run any food program assembly line. But those first few weeks were difficult. Maximizing my own time has also been hard, as well as figuring out alternative revenue streams, outside of grants, because some of the ideas are so big that grants just can't pay for them.

### ALICE

What has been the most gratifying part of the work?

### LAUREN

I always knew that I wanted to engage in acts of service. I think that's because I grew up in the church and saw F.U.B.U. philanthropy very early on but, separate from that, there was the example I had from my father. When I was in elementary school, he was a baseball coach for kids at the local park. By high school, he had a sort of community program at the same park where he tutored students and tried to keep folks out of gangs. I had many examples of people spending their entire life, no matter what they did professionally, engaging in this kind of work around Los Angeles, but especially in and around South Central and Watts.

The most gratifying part is that I get to do the work that I've been fantasizing about since 2010, when I first got to art school. My subject is South Central. But, when I was in school, I was only describing the work. The work was in conversation and being critiqued in the studio and in class, far outside its context in Valencia. I knew that I couldn't maintain that separation. It's amazing to be able

Opposite page, top row, left to right: Juan Alcala, Lesley Thornton, Josie Macias, Marcus Daniels, Breonte Davis, Rodrick Jonson, Allison Garcia, Monique McWilliams, Catrina Mendoza, Andreina Giron, Angel Xotlanhua, Anthony Creeden, Muna El Futuri, Michelle Beyer, Vetho Cato, Summer Humas, Cheyenne Williams, Louis Strandberg, Gabriela Castillo, Matias Duplantier, and Krysta Grasso.

Bottom row, left to right: Lauren Halsey, Emmanuel Carter, Nika Kolodziej, and Korina Matyas.

Images courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery. Photography by Allen Chen.

This page: Lauren Halsey by Texas Isalah.

to finally merge contexts every single day. I can make my art and be in the neighborhood, be immersed in the streets the way I love being in the streets, be with my friends. It's the most soulful way of being.

#### ALICE

I read that part of the mission of Summaeverythang is to support a variety of types of intelligence. What types of networks do you think are necessary to achieve this?

#### LAUREN

I think it's very important to keep what we do local and tap into the people and contexts that already exist and have already been here. There's already so much creative intelligence in the community. I want to tap folks in the community to do workshops, to teach, to hold symposiums, whatever gives them a stage. That includes some of the very idiosyncratic, super poetic commodities that folks make with their hands, as well as everything from music to sign painting to capoeira. I'd like to build out the space over the next five to ten years to house these activities and objects like an archive, or even a museum.

#### ISABEL

One of the things we're speaking about with everyone we're interviewing for this issue is how self-sufficiency and autonomy are crucial components of education. The challenge is figuring out how to teach those mindsets. How have you been able to cultivate and impart these skills?

## BE IMMERSSED IN THE STREETS THE WAY I LOVE..."

#### LAUREN

I realized very early on that if you lose your sense of autonomy, you won't be able to maintain control. That's always been the way I move, and the way I curate how the community center moves—what we say yes to, what we say no to. It's also about not being afraid. Maybe that's easy for me to say because I have so many people working for me and we're a crew that understands each other. I don't want to sound arrogant and say that it comes naturally, but I had a lot of experiences early on that taught me "never again." I have to do this by myself and with people who move the way I move and think the way I think. Anything less will compromise the vision. Above all, we must be true to our ideas. ●

*Lauren Halsey is a Los Angeles-native artist and organizer rethinking the possibilities for art, architecture, and community engagement.*



