

# Los Angeles Times

IMAGE

## ‘It’s this act of love.’ The village behind Lauren Halsey’s community center

By Julissa James

Photography by **Barrington Darius**

Feb. 19, 2025



*This story is part of a zine that L.A. Times Image created in collaboration with Lauren Halsey, Diamond Jones and the Summaeverythang Community Center. The limited-edition zine, printed by -ism, will be at Halsey’s booth at Frieze L.A.*

**We** reached out to the people in Lauren Halsey’s universe who have seen her through the process of creating the Summaeverythang Community Center and are helping make it happen. This chorus of voices shares memories that range from the early stages of the

idea — with 2020’s Summaeverythang Community Center food program — to what having a physical space dedicated to arts programming, health and wellness and more will do for the next generation of kids in South Central.

---

### **Diamond Jones, Summaeverythang Community Center program director**

She tells the story of our community, and she makes it into a fantasy world, like Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory. But when you really dig deep, you can see the pain in her work and what our community stands for. My job is to implement the three pillars that we have for the nonprofit: art, health and wellness, and education. We’re starting from ground zero. We’re building out this community team, this amazing project, which is “sister dreamer,” and then also building out the Community Center, which will be a permanent space hopefully by 2028. It’s not easy when you’re starting something that’s new, but it’s very rewarding because you understand the goal and the end result — which is to bring something that I don’t think has ever been seen before in South Central. The only thing I can compare it to is the Watts Towers. I feel like it’s going to be something where people from all over the world travel to go see it. I think that it will be in the community forever.



### **Monique McWilliams, partner**

She’s a Taurus. When she has an idea, it’s going to happen. It feels like her ethos is getting it done. It’s of her essence. The community benefits from it — the kids, the next generation. Watching the kids’ faces light up and what they take from it is magic. As Black people, so many times we’re told we can’t do something, and to see somebody do things like Lauren does, some of the children will take that with them through life.

### **Hugh Augustine, rapper, chef, collaborator**

I literally just woke up one day to a text from Lauren: “We’re doing food for people in Watts. Do you have the capacity to do 600 meals?” At the time, I had only done 50 meals at one time. I didn’t want to say no. I didn’t want to let Lauren down. And it was such a good cause. I was the first chef to launch the Summaeverythang hot food program. From an art standpoint, Lauren represents for us. I’m actually getting emotional talking about it. She does everything she can to represent us in such an unrestricted way. With the [food program], we were literally doing farm-to-table for people in the Nickerson Gardens. I don’t know if that’s ever been done. The quality of the food that was being delivered to me in the kitchen was literally all organic. Everything. It wasn’t just about her doing it — it’s about doing it with integrity. When you have the ability to give people the best quality thing, that’s what she did. I’m from South Central, and when you grow up in a community where you’re basically criminalized in public spaces, to have something like this that’s not only a monument to our heritage and culture but that’s also going to be a place where people can come and have conversation, just eat lunch or just take a break — that’s huge. There’s going to be some kids growing up with the reality they had that.



(Courtesy of Lauren Halsey)

---

### **Barbara Bestor, architect for the Summaeverythang Community Center**

We need more space in design for kids, for art and after-school programs, without really getting into traditional autonomous architecture. I’ve been really interested in adaptive reuse in general — the whole idea of rebuild, restore, repair. Architecture can do a lot of those things, especially with the older building fabric of California. We’re looking at keeping lots of the existing buildings and then letting something new grow out of it deeper into the campus, like a little bloom of a new thing. It’s this act of love to keep the wood structure there. The other thing that Lauren always had is this really big interest in the idea of an oasis, a kind of garden oasis. She was referring to this really cool nursery in Hawthorne that in itself was a respite — she would go visit, sit there and hang out in this meditative space — and [wanted to] bring some of that through landscape. The conceptual idea around this is that it’s growing out of something, as opposed to tabula rasa, a new building. It’s not a symbolic building. We’re focused on the stewardship of the existing, more industrial, sort of low-key contexts, and caring for that and letting it have beauty, and then adding this scaffold that might change over time. It is almost anti-monumentality. The architecture can be more part of a dialogue with what’s there.

---

### **Barrington Darius, artist, friend and collaborator**

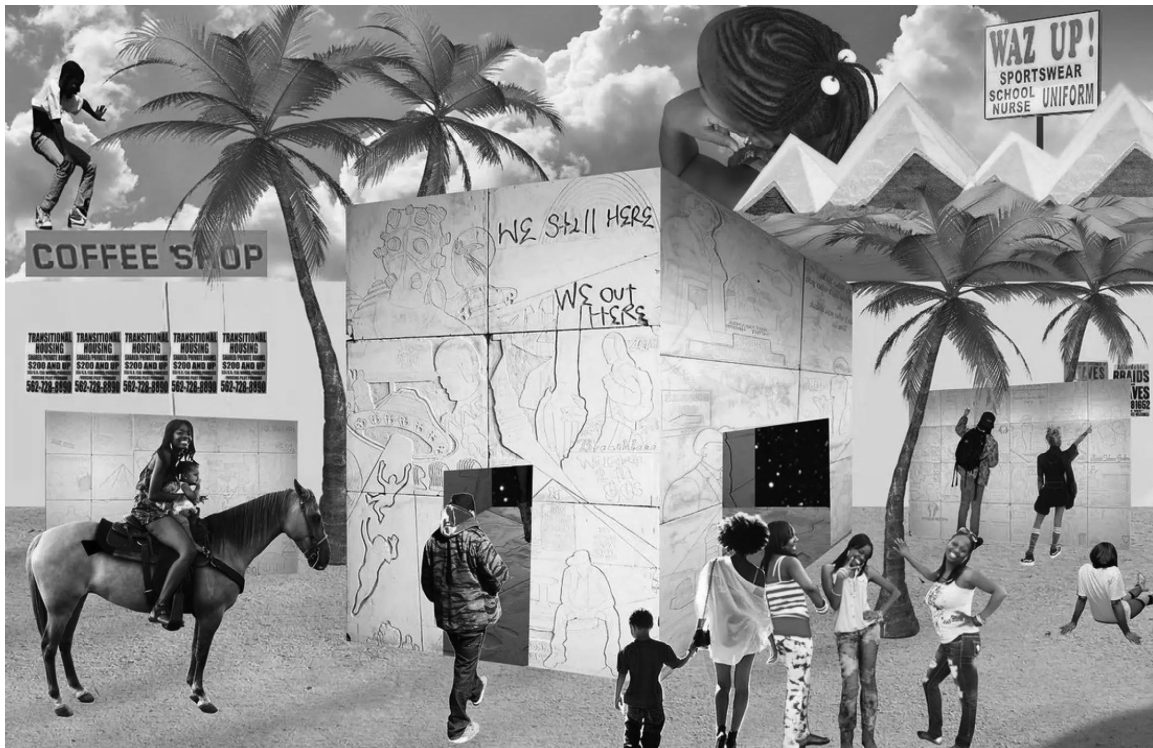
[When I met her] it was 2020, I was home off tour, and I went to her solo show at David Kordansky. It felt like a big L.A. birthday party. Every area of the internal part of L.A., and that is an extension of Lauren, was in that space. We’re from the same neighborhood. I’m from 94th and Central. She’s very East Side. Lauren was just so similar and impressionable to me because I saw a lot of things that I was scared to be and do through her as a vessel. She’s honestly the craziest mind that I know. In collaboration with Russell Hamilton, we’ve been filming her installations and creating these short-forms for the galleries. But it is all in tandem with an ongoing project that is building up to “sister dreamer.” If you look through her archive, documentary interview moments, you’ll see that her dream of urban design has been the foundation of all this s—. The mission here is bigger than us. Not just being funky, not just making people feel good, but the urban design is something that is beyond her.

---

### **David Kordansky, gallerist**

Lauren’s 2020 exhibition was arguably one of the most important exhibitions to take place in an American art gallery in the last 10 to 15 years. That’s how monumentally important it was. You have to understand, most contemporary artists are striving so desperately to create a vision and a sensibility that speak to universal concerns, and the amazing and incredible thing about Lauren is that [she] is speaking to universal concerns through

a language that is specific to a regional cultural space — she’s using not just L.A. as we know it, she’s mining a particular part of Los Angeles, a particular region of L.A., and she is acting as sociologist, archaeologist of a space and a creole, and a region and a culture that is either being eviscerated through gentrification or just simply through individuals being aged out. What she’s done is she’s used this very particular language, iconography and symbolism that so explicitly represents a culture that is specific to South Central and is using that to reach a wider international community. To be Lauren’s main gallerist and her hometown position is to truly live and breathe and understand the need to give back, to provide for a community that, in essence, gave her the legs with which to stand.



(Courtesy of Lauren Halsey)

### **Josie Macias, artist and studio assistant**

She’s just full of light, full of color. Her world is like no other world that I can imagine. It’s like stepping into a different world, a world of peace, freedom and love, good energy and motion. It just makes you want to do so much more. [It’s] where the future should be going toward. There’s so much that South Central has gone through in past history, but the fact that she still acknowledges buildings that are being destroyed or that are still there brings it to life, brings in the color and puts an imagination into the viewers. It feels like she’s trying to convey, “We’re here. And there should be a change in the world.” And whatever it is, she brings the funk.

### **Robin Daniels, Sisters of Watts co-founder**

Someone hit us up on Instagram asking if they can bring produce to us. We were doing a free food giveaway during COVID. I really didn’t know who she was. When I saw “Sum-maeverythang,” I was like, “OK, somebody wants to give back to her community.” Not too many people do that. She was there every time they came — helping, passing out the boxes. With Lauren, it’s now a relationship as a sister, because we never stopped talking. She always calls me about anything she’s doing or I hit her up. A lot of people are like, “Why are you doing this?” I say, “Because I know how it feels being a teenage mom and you don’t get all the help or find the support.” The school I went to is still in Watts. We still go back and help out. People are like, “What y’all don’t do?” We do it all because in every area people need it.



### **Tanya Dorsey, Watts Community Core co-founder**

Watts Community Core has been focused on the community needs from the time of our organization becoming live in 2019. My co-founder, Kevin Hunt, and I piloted a noncontact boxing program in Slauson, South Park and Nickerson Gardens. Then we started a

food program, partnering with Food 4 Less and the GO Campaign. When we started the food program, along came Summaeverythang. She gave us produce to go with our food program. And it was a beautiful thing because it wasn’t just any produce. It was organic. We had one heart for the community. She came to me one time, and she said, “Hey, Tanya, I have this guy, his name is Flea and he wants to see if he can collaborate with us and talk to you. Is it OK if I give you his number?” He called and said, “Hey, T, this is Flea. You’re doing some wonderful things. How about if I bring hot meals on board?” Then he brought his friend, Thomas, who is a painter and artist, and Thomas came and was blown away. He was like, “You know, this is beautiful. Can I bring my friend?” Only for me to know that [friend] was Brad Pitt. We have to honor Lauren because she helped bring this whole collaboration together. I want to lift my sister up and to make the world know that they go over and see her art because her art is what brought on this whole community.

### **Melody Ehsani, designer and friend**

She’s just kind of scratching the surface of how she wants to unfold her vision. Lauren is a very shy person, and she’s usually super quiet. Doesn’t like to talk about herself at all. But the way that she lights up when she talks about this center — it’s different. I think she feels like the steward of it, almost. She’s always wanted to create a space, especially for youth. Growing up in that neighborhood, she had the benefit of her father [sending] her to school outside of her neighborhood. She was able to do all these things that she would have never been able to do within her neighborhood. And so now that she’s in the position that she’s in, I think that all she wants to do is be able to create that environment in her neighborhood for those kids, so that they don’t have to leave. A library, art classes,



music classes, workshops — just consistent programming, so that kids feel like they have somewhere to go after school, so that they don’t get into trouble, so that they have some kind of productivity, so that they have community.

---

### **Emmanuel Carter, musician, artist, friend, studio assistant**

[I’ve known Lauren] since she was 10. She grew up three doors down. One of our other friends brought me to her house so he could get her to come outside and play basketball. It was the connection. Us playing together, we just built a love and a trust for each other. She’s family and a best friend. She’s always said she wanted to bring fresh products to the neighborhood. That was always on her bucket list. We started doing it for three communities — I think it was the Nickerson Gardens, Imperial Courts and Jordan Downs. We got a system that was following a rhythm. We’d get up at 4 in the morning, go get the van to go pick up the boxes and then pick the product. We’d load up the truck, and I’d drive it back to the neighborhood, to the Community Center, where people from the community were helping us load them up. It’s a positive energy, being able to put your vision out there.



***Words & Ephemera:*** Lauren Halsey  
***Portrait photography:*** Barrington Darius  
***Cover:*** Courtesy of Brooklin A. Soumahoro

***Editorial Director:*** Elisa Wouk Almino  
***Design Director:*** Jessica de Jesus  
***Staff Writer:*** Julissa James  
***Art Director:*** Micah Fluellen

***Special thanks:*** Hugh Augustine, Barbara Bestor, Emmanuel Carter, Robin Daniels, Barrington Darius, Tanya Dorsey, Melody Ehsani, Qione Holmes, Diamond Jones, David Kordansky, Josie Macias and Monique McWilliams

*Published by Los Angeles Times Image*  
*Printed in Los Angeles by my.ism LLC*