

SUM OF MANY PARTS

Lauren Halsey tells **Angella Nazarian** how she's reenvisioning her art practice to include the entire community.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **ALLEN CHEN**



Artist Lauren Halsey has made it a mission of her Summaeverythang Community Center to provide free organic produce boxes to residents of Watts and South Central LA.

Top row (left to right): Juan Alcalá, Lesley Thornton, Josie Macías, Marcus Daniels, Breonte Davis, Rodrick Jonson, Allison García, Monique McWilliams, Catrina Mendoza, Andreina Giron, Angel Xotlanihua, Anthony Creeden, Muna El Futuri, Michelle Beyder, Vetho Cato, Summer Humes, 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

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Angella Nazarian: Your family has lived in South Central for several generations, and when you came back to LA, you set up your studio there. Last year you opened a community center and a few months ago, you began distributing fresh produce to neighborhood residents. How did that come about?

Lauren Halsey: The Summaeverythang food distribution happens next door to my art studio, at the community center. The community center has been a mission I've had since 2005 or 2006 when I was in community college and realized that with whatever career path I took, there would need to be a record of service in the neighborhood to coexist with my profession. This value of recycling resources, funds, love and energy back into the place I love has always been at the core of what I do.

AN: What is your vision for the community center?

LH: The Summaeverythang Community Center shapeshifts to whatever the needs, desires, and dreams of the neighborhood are at the moment. The bulk of this year—we're 19 weeks as of this week—has been the food program because of COVID restrictions, social distancing and various liabilities that prevented folks from gathering right now. In my dream world, post-corona there will be several initiatives, programs, workshops and symposiums happening seamlessly all at once, across multiple contexts—educational, creative, sport, gardening, performance.

AN: How did you decide where to begin?

LH: I landed on the food program because of the lack of resources being offered to folks, but also because I've always had questions about the quality of food and produce in areas that are considered "food deserts." Who's making the decision to limit our access to healthy food? Who controls the produce supply chain in grocery stores in South Central versus who curates and controls the supply chain in stores on the Westside? As a kid, always going to school outside of my neighborhood, I noticed the differences neighborhoods had in access to a higher level of nutrition. I've always found the differences criminal and racist—the attack on our nourishment, bodies, health, minds, everything. So, I've made it a mission and initiative of the community center to provide free organic produce boxes to folks in the neighborhood. By doing so, I hope to provide healthy resources consistently but also engage folks with new standards that I'll continue to fight for post-corona. We're not providing wilted greens that taste like pesticides as some of the grocery stores do. We're providing the complete opposite.

AN: The speed at which you were able to scale your vision has been remarkable. Now you have weekly deliveries of pallets of fresh organic vegetables from local farms in refrigerated trucks and the complex process of packing and distributing an average of 600 to 700 produce boxes weekly to South Central and Watts residents. Who are the people helping you to connect the dots?

LH: Some of everybody. Chef Vinny Dotolo introduced me to Sam Rogers, who is the produce buyer for his restaurants, including Animal and Jon & Vinny's. Working with Sam has been a game changer in my access to quality produce because

she's deeply involved with the Santa Monica Farmers Market as a big buyer but also has great relationships with the farmers. Sam connected me to local family farms that deliver produce to the market each week on a huge scale. Each Sunday, she and her colleague, B. Evy-Marie, email me a list of 10 to 20 farms to curate the produce box contents from there. It's been a huge help to better frame what we're doing. Korina Matyas, who works with Sam and B., has also been a great liaison between all facets of the food program. We went to middle and high school together in LA, and she's always been deep in the world of farmer's markets here for as long as I can remember. As a food and agriculture advocate, she has a passion and desire to disrupt oppressive food systems and has viewed her work as a form of liberation to find new and inclusive systems. And lastly, my partner, Monique McWilliams, and all of my friends—they have always been part of what I do. They've worked in my studio as assistants since day one, so there's never been a learning curve on collaboration. All the guys I've known since I was 10—Monique, my little cousins, friends from high school, friends from college, new friends. It's a family affair kind of thing.

AN: What is your long-term goal for the community center?

LH: The produce initiative is incredibly expensive and impossible to sustain forever. I hope to one day open a store that has a grocery component. But post-corona we're going to continue the program weekly, no matter what. In the meantime, we are looking forward to building a community center garden where you can chill—a beauty and rest garden with aesthetic components, a sort of remix of a sculpture garden. But it will also be a functional garden where we can harvest produce and recirculate organic fruits and vegetables back into the neighborhood. We'll also continue to support other folks and groups engaged in food advocacy here with monetary and infrastructural donations. I see it as a mission that we'll always continue to engage in, but it will also spread out to distribute and support in other ways which is crucial to building more access to better produce.

AN: In both your art practice and the community center, you tackle big, complicated projects. What gives you the courage to do that?

LH: There's just work to do, and I do it. I do it in doses. I don't know that I'm consciously thinking about Funkadelic's or P-Funk's maximalism when I'm doing it, but I guess if I really thought about it, I would think about how they navigate music, aesthetic and political worlds all at once. I'm inspired by that sort of ambition.

AN: What have you learned about yourself through this project?

LH: That I love working with my lover and my friends. It's a huge component to maintaining the passion and soul of what I do. That I don't know how to take a break, no matter how much I complain about exhaustion! And that I love making art, but it must always coexist with movement happening on the streets if it's going to continue to fill me with joy and make a tangible difference for the folks I represent in my sculptures.

Volunteers, like Breonte Davis (left) and Marcus Daniels, work all facets of Summaeverythang's produce program, including loading, unloading, assembly line, packing and box distribution.

