A sloping, slouching papier-mâché environment fills Recess for Lauren Halsey’s constructed installation Kingdom Splurge 4. Small palm trees cover the contouring sides while pools of “beauty water” cascade over sandy portals that visitors can walk through. The social sculpture is the latest iteration in a series of ongoing architectural forms the artist creates to explore in building a “black utopia.”
For a three-year period beginning in 2007, Halsey mocked up a Funk-inspired, cosmic black universe with iconic figures such as Grace Jones and people and places from South Central, Los Angeles, where the artist grew up. One early blueprint, created in 2008, illustrates, “Jesus Upholstery,” a storefront business with Egyptian kings and queens wearing Jordan gym shoes as they stand in front of the Giza pyramid complex. Kingdom visually sources the annals of black lineage to link black history with the present as a way to imagine a black future.

“I was making these aspirational collages that I saw as blueprints for my neighborhood and basically it was me revisioning and remixing what was already there to create new associations that I saw as transcended,” Halsey tells The Creators Project. “I made a million of them.” The Yale MFA graduate adds, “By 2012, Photoshop wasn’t enough so when I got to grad school I went with the intention to realize these places as physical spaces.”

![Lauren Halsey, Kingdom Slurge 1](image)

“For, Kingdom Splurge 1, there was an urgency to archive businesses that were being erased,” explains Halsey. “I was trying to save all of them. I wanted to represent this nebulas othering of South Central. You would make a right [in the installation] and it would be my remix of all the hood businesses and that moment was about economic empowerment or F.U.B.U. (For Us By Us)—really representing the block if we owned it.” In Kingdom Splurge 2, Halsey includes objects that her mother, grandmother, and best friend would want in a black utopia. “My best friend was like, ‘I would just need Patrón’ so there’s a pyramid stuffed with Patrón,” says the artist. “My mother was like, ‘I just need hair products,’ so there’s a pyramid stuffed with hair rollers. My grandmother was like, ‘I just need God,’ so I put in a figurine representative of our reverend because that was the closest I could get.”
Lauren Halsey, *Kingdom Slurge 2*

Halsey explains, “In the second one, I started to distill things. It was about sculpture. I created a mystical meeting ground for the dead, I started to think about lives and death and what happens in these neighborhoods.” She adds, “That was when I started placing people’s narratives in it.”

Last summer, Halsey was an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem and presented *Kingdom Splurge 3*. Along one wall of the museum’s top-floor gallery, Halsey carved hieroglyphics into 16 drywall slabs, detailing street signs and cultural icons like Michael Jordan and Malcolm X. She also continued archiving black life; names of men and women lost to violence and police are etched in memoriam. “Each hieroglyph responds to the previous one,” she says. “They are a spiritual map and a container to hold our stories.”
Notably absent from *Kingdom Splurge 4* are the faces and spaces that Halsey collaged in her first three fantasy landscapes. She sees it less as an archival environment and more as, “a funky healing space built absent of all the mess.” It is a safe space that reacts to violence and highlights an aestheticized Funk that inspired the artist’s vision nearly a decade ago. Pictures of Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, or Tamir Rice may not be present, but their spirits are in the room.

Halsey and the artist Sable Elyse Smith released a conceptual soundtrack for *Kingdom Splurge 4*, that details what a liberated *Kingdom* might sound like. It features Earth Wind & Fire’s “Keep Your Head to the Sky,” James Brown’s “The Payback,” and Desiigner’s “Panda,” revealing, as Smith notes in *Ecstatic Resilience*, an essay written for the show that “there’s a rhythm to everything.”

*Lauren Halsey, Kingdom Splurge 4*
Halsey will continue mapping her funky kingdom in the future. In her *Funkifesto II*, she writes, “Duh goal is for cosmic travelerz to not only be turned out by the Funk but to be able to create structurez, to suggestz other worlds in response to any degree of fluctuation in any environment, with any inventory of materialz.” She added, “To make our own magic, to come up with new images and proposalz for our own tomorrowz. We will use what we got to make what we want.”

_Lauren Halsey will be in conversation with Antwaun Sargent at Recess Gallery on Saturday, July 16 at noon. For more information on Lauren Halsey’s art, click here._

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