

An abstract artwork featuring a central figure in a yellow garment, surrounded by large, organic shapes in blue, green, and brown. The composition is layered and textured, with visible brushstrokes and overlapping colors.

FRYE
ART MUSEUM

Tschabalala Self

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Tschabalala Self's work examines the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality, focusing particularly on the iconographic significance of the black female body in contemporary culture. The artist creates exuberant, multilayered characters—not depictions of herself or others, but “avatars”—that celebrate complexities of black life that are often obscured in the American imagination by stereotypes. Most of these avatars are constructed from machine-sewn fabric scraps that Self collects over time, combined with cut-out portions of discarded canvases, and layered with acrylic paint, oil pastel, and charcoal. The specific associations attached to the incorporated fabrics and patterns anchor the artist's characters in reality, becoming a visual grammar through which fantastical new personalities and alternative story lines can be imagined.

Self's first solo museum exhibition in the United States, *Tschabalala Self* brings together figurative works in painting, drawing, sculpture, and video, populating the gallery with characters from across her budding career. The exaggerated physical attributes of the depicted figures reflect the artist's own experiences and contemporary cultural attitudes toward race and gender, which are continually reinforced by popular media and can be traced back to histories like that of Sarah “Saartjie” Baartman (1789–1815), who is referenced explicitly in the exhibition.

Through owning and amplifying these traits—in a subversive performance of identity that the artist has likened to the exaggerated gender performance of drag—Self's unruly subjects disrupt expectations, declaring their agency and physical autonomy. Seen leaping, dancing, touching themselves, coupling, and contorting their bodies according to their own desires, her avatars assert that ordinary pleasures can also be acts of defiance.

Tschabalala Self (American, b. 1990, Harlem, New York) lives and works in New York City and New Haven, Connecticut. She received her BA from Bard College in 2012 and her MFA from the Yale School of Art in 2015. Recent exhibitions include *Bodega Run*, Yuz Museum, Shanghai (2018); *Bodega Run*, Pilar Corrias Gallery, London (2017); *Sour Patch*, Thierry Goldberg, Miami (2017); *Tschabalala Self*, Parasol Unit Foundation for Contemporary Art, London (2017); and *Tschabalala Self*, Tramway, Glasgow (2017).

Bellyphat, 2016. Painted canvas, fabric, oil, acrylic, and Flashe on canvas. 80 x 60 in. Courtesy of the artist and Thierry Goldberg Gallery, New York



Open Wide

By Kemi Adeyemi

You have spent a lifetime seeing black women's bodies splayed out before you, smeared across sidewalks, pressed against walls, and thrown on top of police cars; a lifetime accumulating images of flattened black women spread against your screens, opened wide in all senses for you to look at, dig into, inhabit, take over; a lifetime being trained that black women's bodies are here for you to watch, hound, desire, need, use. You of course bring a lifetime of seeing with you every time you walk into a museum space. What are you expecting to see here today?

Tschabalala Self's 2019 Frye Art Museum exhibition of paintings, sculpture, and video redirects the networks of looking that have long shaped your imaginaries of, and relationships to, black women and femmes. This does not mean that Self works to correct the damaging stereotypes that overdetermine black life, or strives to rehabilitate a more "respectable" blackness. (Though she does provide moments when we might recuperate gentleness, as happens in *Love to Saartjie* [2015].) She instead offers paintings that at times literally look back at you, as in *Spare Moment* (2015), forcing you to reckon with your own voyeuristic gaze. Self often crafts characters whose playful raunchiness turns away from you altogether to focus instead on the interior networks of black desire—desire to be in relation to one's own body and self, first and foremost. *Loner* and *Butterfly* (both 2016) feature femme characters putting their brashly naked bodies on display, yet we are unsure for whom: unsure whether they are looking toward or past us, over their shoulders or directly ahead. In these paintings and throughout her oeuvre, Self mobilizes these plays of position to create a generative dissonance, a refusal of seamlessness, that undercuts your desire that these characters be wholly available to you.



Sunday, 2016. Fabric, Flashe, and acrylic paint on canvas. 56 x 64 in. Courtesy of the artist and Thierry Goldberg Gallery, New York.

Self's works trespass genre and medium, and her specific technique of bringing collage to bear on traditional painting practices provides the conditions in which the multidimensionality of what it feels like to inhabit bodies marked by a range of black genders and sexualities can surface. In the highly textured compositions of her paintings, recycled fabric, often culled from her family's collection, is stitched across oil, acrylic, and Flashe paints to give rise to three-dimensional characters that emerge in the soft lines created by fabric that ripples, folds, and puckers. Their body parts are composed from different patterns and textures, resulting in obscured gazes and limbs that appear out of proportion or slightly askew. These seemingly disjointed figures amplify Self's interest in tarrying in the space between figuration and abstraction, where the materiality of black bodies intersects with (and pushes against) stereotypes of The Black Body.

Self often thinks through movement itself as a method of introducing the multidimensionality of black life. *Sock* (2018) spotlights a black male form in the midst of a grand movement. But the sheer threat that black men's movements have historically been seen to signal (let alone the threat that has historically circumscribed the black penis) is belied by the practice of comfort suggested by the socks he dons. Other works are exemplary of Self's skill at rendering depth of field and mobilizing repeating, if slightly irregular, patterns to suggest movement, as happens in *Bet* (2016). The stillness conveyed by a woman who sits in traditional, staid portrait position, and complemented by the muted yellow wall behind her, is undercut by the motion of the red diamond flooring on which she sits. Here, pattern grounds Self's ongoing argument that black people are, simply, complex beings. To be sure, the woman is not merely sitting or waiting; her legs and feet are set in an impossible position, suggesting that she is on the verge of animation.

Animation indeed becomes a natural step for Self, who takes motility on in the single-channel video *My Black Ass* (2018). In it, a woman works through different positions that foreground her black ass, and the emphasis on *my* signifies a defiant, proud ownership. The video is a central part of Self's larger efforts to highlight how black women themselves understand and deploy their bodies for their own pleasure and amusement. The solo nude woman in *Coco* (2013) may indeed glance over her shoulder for an unseen onlooker, but the painting is perhaps more reflective of her desire to pose. Her nudity is not hypersexualized for viewers but establishes her intentional orientation toward desire, toward being looked at. This is further emphasized in paintings in which Self depicts black women sensing their bodies in conjunction with others, as the grinning woman of *Bellyphat* (2016) and the lovers in *Sunday* (2016) are locked in pleasurable embraces that are increasingly abstracted in *Entwined* (2014).

These networks of intimacy that Self captures are certainly circumscribed by sex, but she presses viewers to negotiate their own expectations for how sex is (or should be) mapped onto black bodies. Self's large-scale, freestanding sculptures that center the body's lower half may prove to be the most generatively challenging in this regard. The exclamatory size and colors of *Big Red* and *Garter* (both 2018) draw the viewer in by their seemingly frank representations of vaginas. They are, however, physiologically indeterminate sculptures that merely gesture toward the anatomical expressions of sex organs amid the rounded feet, knees, legs, and asses that are also figured. As you are able to stand next to these pieces, putting your own body in conversation with them, you are asked to question your own investments in how the gendered body "should" be registered through readily discernible sex organs.

As happens in much of Self's work, the sculptures provide the opportunity to think more creatively and expansively about how black genders and sexualities are shaped and inhabited. They are part of her larger practice of refusing ready-made images of black people that you might easily contextualize and thus consume. Her collected works instead ask you to sit in and think with the very notion of being-in-relation, necessitating more critical understandings of how black life is felt in a range of bodies, emotions, and environments that are not—and perhaps should not be—readily available or easily detected.

Kemi Adeyemi is assistant professor of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies at the University of Washington and director of The Black Embodiments Studio. Her forthcoming books, essays, and curatorial projects use performance as a site and methodology for theorizing the contours of contemporary black queer life.



Left: *Spare Moment*, 2015. Oil, pigment and fabric on canvas. 64 x 42 in. Courtesy of the artist and Thierry Goldberg Gallery, New York; **Right:** *Sock*, 2018. Oil, Flashe, acrylic and fabric on canvas. 96 x 84 in. Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London. Photo: Christopher Burke Studio.





Cover image: Tschabalala Self. *Spare Moment* (detail), 2015. Oil, pigment and fabric on canvas. 64 x 42 in. Courtesy of the artist and Thierry Goldberg Gallery, New York.

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