

Petzel

“Tschabalala Self,” *Wonderland*, June 14, 2024.

Wonderland.

TSCHABALALA SELF

The US-based artist brings the energy of Harlem, New York to Finland with *Around the Way*, her first solo exhibit in the country — and we hear from her all about it.



Tschabalala Self © Paula Virta / EMMA – Espoo Museum of Modern Art

“Tschabalala Self,” *Wonderland*, June 14, 2024.

“The title is taken from a Black American colloquialism that is a means of describing someone: a person who is from your neighbourhood and has certain charms and characteristics that are inherent to that place,” US-based artist Tschabalala Self tells *Wonderland* as we discuss her new exhibit, *Around the Way*, presented at the Espoo Museum of Modern Art in Finland. “It’s usually something you’d say about somebody who is from the same place as you or a place that you are familiar with.”

For her, that place is Harlem, New York — where she was born and raised. Painting a nuanced portrait of the people and spaces of her metropolis hometown, she depicts the lively streets and intimate interior worlds of people she has found, in her own words, “interesting, beautiful, charismatic and just generally inspiring.” Working in a multimedia discipline that combines textile work, printmaking, and painting, she captures the complexity of her neighbours through fictionalised characters and aims to highlight the beauty and multi-faceted nature of being a Black American.

“These subjects have always been the inspiration for my paintings. I think a lot of the characters in my works are rooted in who I remember seeing or knowing, because all of my muses are not real people, but rather characters composed of many people.”

“Tschabalala Self,” *Wonderland*, June 14, 2024.



Tschabalala Self: Around the Way © Paula Virta / EMMA – Espoo Museum of Modern Art

Hi Tschabalala! How are you doing?

I'm doing well! I am pretty much on Helsinki time now after traveling from New York. I just finished installing the show, so I am a bit tired but excited for the opening on Tuesday. This is my second trip to Finland. I've been staying mostly in Espoo, which is really picturesque. I like being by the sea and woods with Helsinki just a few minutes away. Helsinki is a very cool city. I haven't travelled much in the Nordic countries — so this is a new and exciting experience!

“Tschabalala Self,” *Wonderland*, June 14, 2024.

Going back to the beginning, what are your first memories with making art?

Some of my first memories of making art are from childhood. I always made artwork as a child and I can remember doing simple painting and sketches at my childhood home. I used to have a little easel that my Mother set-up for me in the living room — my first studio. I remember spending a lot of time there by myself, just painting and daydreaming.

What were your early experiences consuming art history and how have they influenced what you aim to say through your own work?

I’m not sure I was even aware I was experiencing art history at the time but a lot of my initial experiences with “art history” were just engaging with art while growing up in New York City. There are so many museums and art institutions in New York, it is nearly impossible not to interact with them. I remember visiting many as child and teen on school trips, with friends and family.

The Met was really close to my elementary school, and I would visit often before heading home after school. Most of my first engagements with historical artworks were at the Met. Harlem is a 30 minute bus ride from the Upper East Side, and I would see various forms of art and artistic expression in my own neighbourhood.

There were many vendors on 125th Street that would sell Black American vernacular art. I would often see reproductions of Ernie Barnes’ work and posters of Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden and Charles Alston paintings. I didn’t know who these artists really were at the time, but they were always in my visual landscape. As I got older, I became familiar with the significance of these artists. I grew up with Faith Ringgold children books which I read often and mulled over hundreds of times.

“Tschabalala Self,” *Wonderland*, June 14, 2024.

On 125th Street, the Studio Museum always had what I thought to be a Black American flag — there would have always been hundreds of these flags sold for the African American Day Parade — but I later came to know this flag to be a David Hammons artwork.

So a lot of my first interactions with art history were just everyday interactions with art and visual culture.

How has your practice evolved over time? Do you have a typical artistic process? Where do you begin with a piece?

I have a somewhat regimented process but it is designed in such a way that it can change. I’m usually starting things in one of three ways and from there the possibilities are really endless in terms of how the projects can ultimately be resolved. I would say my practice has become more regimented, but also more free within that regiment over the years.

In the beginning, when I was still trying to find the boundaries of my style I experimented more. Yet, these experiments weren’t always that fruitful because I didn’t fully understand my process. Things are different now in the sense that my process is often the same, but just more refined and sophisticated which allows for new possibilities to unfold.

Those who are familiar with my practice know that there is lots of textiles and sewing involved, as well as painting, so most works usually have two stages to their development: the point where they are being sewn and the point where they are being painted.

Petzel

“Tschabalala Self,” *Wonderland*, June 14, 2024.



Left: Tschabalala Self, *The Patriarch*, 2023. Gaby and Johannes Senn, Switzerland. Right: Tschabalala Self, *Waltz*, 2023. Courtesy of Tschabalala Self Studio. © Paula Virta / EMMA – Espoo Museum of Modern Art



Left: Tschabalala Self, *Lovers in Window – Scene 1*, 2024. Courtesy of Tschabalala Self Studio © Paula Virta / EMMA – Espoo Museum of Modern Art. Right: Tschabalala Self, *Negligee 1*, 2023. Courtesy of Tschabalala Self Studio © Paula Virta / EMMA – Espoo Museum of Modern Art

“Tschabalala Self,” *Wonderland*, June 14, 2024.

Congratulations on *Around the Way*! Can you tell us about the inspiration behind this exhibition?

The title is taken from a Black American colloquialism that is a means of describing someone: a person who is from your neighbourhood and has certain charms and characteristics that are inherent to that place. It's usually something you'd say about somebody who is from the same place as you or a place that you are familiar with. So, that's one of the main inspirations for the show – thinking about the characters and people from Harlem that I have found interesting, beautiful, charismatic and just generally inspiring.

These subjects have always been the inspiration for my paintings. I think a lot of the characters in my works are rooted in who I remember seeing or knowing, because all of my muses are not real people, but rather characters composed of many people.

The show give audiences a view into the everyday life of the Harlemites of my memory. The first room is a street scene, showing various characters walking, in window seals, and conversing around you. From there, viewers will enter into an interior space — a home — showing the inner lives and domestic settings of the people that live in this neighbourhood. Lastly, the audience experiences a third room, which is an intimate space. This space is a state of mind as opposed to a real physical location.

The pieces highlight portraits of individuals in quite intimate spaces. What is it about the relationship between a person and their environment that feels so special to you?

It's a symbiotic relationship which is really fascinating. The environment informs the person and the person also informs the environment, which is an idea that I

“Tschabalala Self,” *Wonderland*, June 14, 2024.

have become increasingly interested in how each factor tunes and shapes the other.

How does it feel to bring these spaces abroad, to Finland?

It’s exciting. I’ve never really spent much time in this part of the world. The first time I came to Finland was two years ago and I was here for about 48 hours for a site visit at EMMA. I’ve now come back for the install and have been here for a longer time, so I have a better sense of the city, of Espoo and of the culture here too. It’s exciting to be here with my work and this project because it is very much rooted in my own personal experience, but by bringing it here to Finland — to a place that is so geographically and culturally different to where I’m from — I realise the transcultural power of the works and how some of the topics they address are quite moving for audiences here too.



Tschabalala Self: Around the Way © Paula Virta / EMMA – Espoo Museum of Modern Art

Petzel

“Tschabalala Self,” *Wonderland*, June 14, 2024.



Tschabalala Self, 12pm on 145th Street, 2022. Courtesy of Tschabalala Self Studio © Paula Virta / EMMA – Espoo Museum of Modern Art

Your work is really rooted in your identity as a Black American woman — how has your own relationship with your identity evolved overtime and has that influenced your art from project to project?

I'm not sure I've had an evolving relationship with my identity. I don't think I have a relationship with my identity at all because it is so inherent to me, so it would be like having a relationship with my hand or elbow. I just am, it's just a part of my corporeal experience and its part of my body. It's not something I necessarily have a relationship with. Maybe I could have a relationship with my identity if I felt more removed from it, but because it feels like such an integral part of my being, I don't think I have a relationship with it.

“Tschabalala Self,” *Wonderland*, June 14, 2024.

Yet, I can say that my understanding of my identity and of others has definitely evolved and become more complex over time.

What is one dream you had that you’ve seen come true, and what is one dream that you have for your future self?

My dream to bring my artwork all over the world has come true, which I am very thankful for. I think I’ve been fortunate to have a lot of things I’ve wanted for my practice happen. I guess when you accomplish certain things, you grow to develop new desires. I mainly just want to continue to share my work with new audiences in different parts of the world. I’m grateful for all of the places I’ve gone to thus far and am looking forward to going to more in the future.

Are there any other artists that are inspiring you right now?

There are so many, countless artists are inspiring me at this moment – many of them are artists that I’ve always looked at, even when I was still studying, that are still out here working in the field. Then, there are also so many young artists that I learn about every day. I am thankful to share time and space with all of these individuals!

Tschabalala Self: Around the Way is presented in collaboration with the Saastamoinen Foundation at EMMA–Espoo Museum of Modern Art from 8 May 2024 – 5 May 2025 as part of the In Collection exhibition series.

14 JUNE 2024

<https://www.wonderlandmagazine.com/2024/06/14/tschabalala-self/>