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The Wall Street Journal, October 28, 2020.

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Artist Tschabalala Self Sees Bodies Like No One Else Does

Before her upcoming exhibition in New York, Self breaks down her fundamental influences and being name-checked by rapper Pusha T.

By [Lindsay Gellman](#) [Follow](#)

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Self, in her New Haven studio. "I like working from places other than the head, because sometimes the painting goes in an odder direction," she says. PHOTO: "TSCHABALALA SELF, 2020, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALERIE EVA PRESENHUBER, ZURICH / NEW YORK, PHOTO: CHRISTIAN DEFONTE"

520 W 25th Street New York NY 10001

Tel 212 680 9467 Fax 212 680 9473 info@petzel.com www.petzel.com

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The Artist: In her artworks, Tschabalala Self explores how Black figures are presented and seen, and the tension between image and identity, an issue that's personal. "If I go somewhere and no one knows I'm a painter, I'm still perceived by my gender and race," she says. "I've always had to navigate what that means for me."

At 30, Self has already spent years deconstructing and refashioning the Black body. Her works—often a mix of collage and painting on massive canvases—typically center the Black form in flattened space. Her recent exhibitions, such as those at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, the Rubell Museum in Miami and MoMA PS1 in New York City, have tended to draw out the relationships between her subjects and the tropes that permeate popular media depictions of Black culture. Self seeks to explore how we arrive at labels and stereotypes, particularly those influenced by gender and race, and hints that nuance is lost in that process.

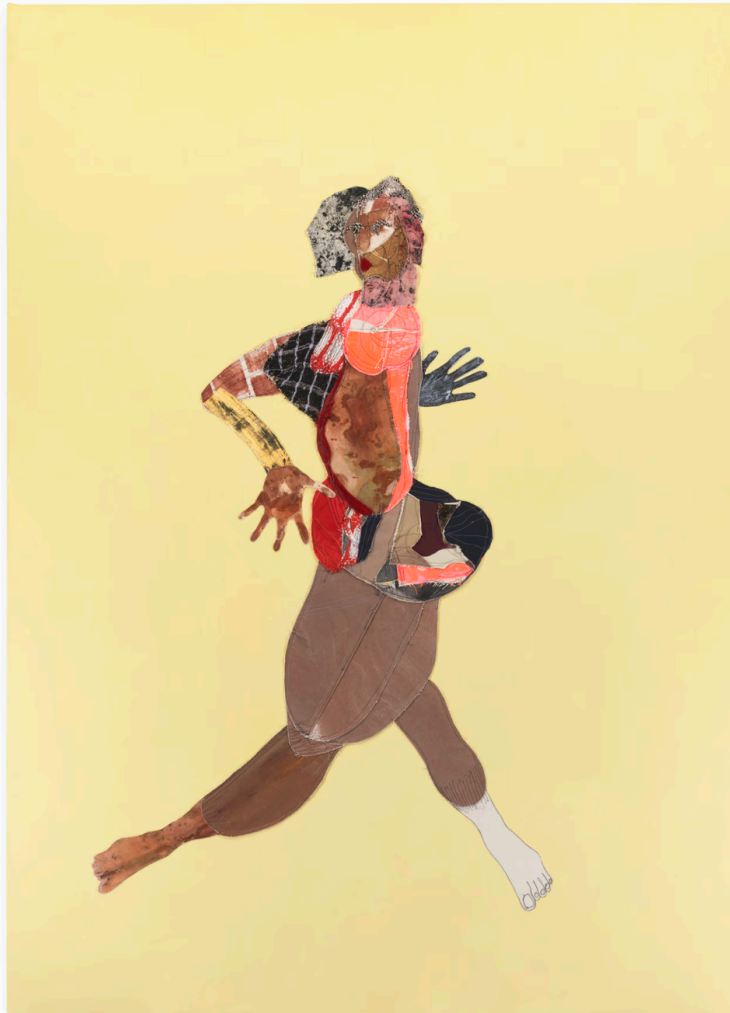
For instance, a work called *Sprewell* depicts a male subject wearing the jersey of former NBA star Latrell Sprewell, layers of denim and a chain necklace while he's locked in an embrace with a woman and a game plays on TV. The idea, Self says, is to allude to the various ways in which the former athlete "holds a lot of psychic energy within the Black American imagination," including the notoriety he earned for his violent behavior.

Inside Self's sun-drenched studio in New Haven, Connecticut, are large-scale works in various states of completion. An appliqué pelvis takes shape on the floor; a woman with chartreuse gloves graces an inverted canvas, which leans against a support, not yet dry. Elsewhere, there are towering busts of women's legs, clad in high heels. For both her images and sculptures, size matters. "The figures need to be at least life size," she says. "I don't want them to be read as dolls."

After completing her master of fine arts degree at the Yale School of Art in 2015, Self chose to stay in New Haven, rather than return to her native New York City, in part because it offered affordable square footage. Her workspace several stories up in an erstwhile factory near the Yale campus is "a really good deal," she says.

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"Fast Girl" (2020, © Tschabalala Self), made from fabric, charmeuse, silk, velvet, paper, pigment, acrylic and painted canvas (213.5 x 152.5 cm / 84 x 60 in). PHOTO: TSCHABALALA SELF, FAST GIRL, 2020, FABRIC, CHARMEUSE, SILK, VELVET, PAPER, PIGMENT, ACRYLIC, AND PAINTED CANVAS ON CANVAS, 213.5 X 152.5 CM / 84 X 60 IN, © TSCHABALALA SELF, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALERIE EVA PRESENHUBER, ZURICH / NEW YORK

Her Process: Drawn to printmaking as an undergraduate at Bard College, Self sees her current practice as a natural evolution of printing techniques. She typically begins with found scraps of fabric, rearranging them until a human form emerges. "Usually I'll start with some body part and then build out from there," she says. She stitches the pieces together with a sewing machine and affixes the fabric to a canvas. "I like working from places other than the head, because sometimes the painting goes in an odder direction." Then, she adds paint.

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As Self works, she generates textile byproducts that become fodder for future pieces. “I’m constantly needing to work so that I pump out the [excess] materials to make the works,” she says.

Her Influences: Growing up in Harlem, her parents, both educators, “had a huge library of Black thought philosophy from the ‘60s and ‘70s,” Self says. Among the volumes she keeps within reach on a well-stocked bookcase in her studio: Calvin C. Hernton’s *Sex and Racism in America* (1965) and George S. Schuyler’s novel *Black No More* (1931).

Self often listens to podcasts, particularly niche unscripted programs on topics like veganism and celebrity culture, while she’s in her studio. “They help me understand the tone of the larger cultural conversations happening at any given moment,” she says.

When she’s not working, she’ll choose music from one of her playlists, which include R&B, disco, soft rock, Black country, hip-hop and rap. Earlier this year, she earned a shoutout from rapper Pusha T on a leaked track. “I might even buy a home out in Mississauga,” he raps. “On my walls, have scrawls of Tschabalala’s.” When a friend sent Self the leaked snippet, she was ecstatic. “For artists who have created the cultural output that has inspired my practice to find importance or relevance in the work feels like the work is doing part of what I want it to do,” she says. “That’s a huge personal accomplishment.”

Her Socially Distant Routine: Less travel and lighter social schedules have left Self with more time in the studio during the week. “It’s been good for me to have that time and energy to focus solely on my work and not have any other brain drain stuff going on—like going out or going out of the country—because it really takes a lot out of you,” she says. Many nights, she makes dinner at home and so far hasn’t had to dip too far into her quarantine stockpile of canned foods. “I’m working pretty late, most of the time,” she says. “My life here is very no frills.”

On weekends, she makes the roughly two-hour drive to New York’s Hudson Valley to spend time with her partner, Mike Mosby, a curator, DJ and community organizer who’s based there. “I drive a lot,” she says. “I feel like driving’s part of my identity.” While upstate, they go on long hikes.

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"Black Face with Streaked Wig (red and black) [2020, © Tschabalala Self], made from colored pencil, acrylic paint, gouache, charcoal and graphite (36 x 28 in). Courtesy, the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich/New York. PHOTO: TSCHABALALA SELF, BLACK FACE WITH STREAKED WIG (RED AND BLACK), 2020, COLORED PENCIL, ACRYLIC PAINT, GOUACHE, CHARCOAL, GRAPHITE, ON ARCHIVAL INKJET PRINT, UNIQUE, 36 X 28 IN, © TSCHABALALA SELF, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALERIE EVA PRESENHUBER, ZURICH / NEW YORK

Up Next: *Cotton Mouth*, Self's exhibition at Eva Presenhuber in New York City, is set to open November 6, having been earlier postponed due to Covid-19. It takes its name from a slang term for dry mouth that can accompany drug use. "The show is about the idea of culture making in this abstract way, how culture is passed down, like an oral history," she says. "Cotton has a very specific history in the Americas as it relates to American slavery."

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In some ways, her newer art predicted pandemic life. In years past, her subjects often occupied public spaces like a bodega or a city street. But, more recently, just before lockdown, Self had begun making more paintings featuring domestic spaces.

A new diptych, *Carpet*, on view in *Cotton Mouth*, depicts a couple gesturing toward one another yet ensconced in separate frames. Of another piece in the show, *Fast Girl*, Self notes both the figure's frantic, kinetic energy and the title's multiple meanings. "The term implicates a woman who's transgressing in some way," she says. "I wanted to play with that and allow it to be a double entendre. I play a lot with terms, words I've heard a lot my whole life, expressions, especially as they relate to Black femininity."

The upcoming show also marks Self's first foray into sound art, which began as a way to multitask while driving. As she formulated plans for the show, Self recorded stream-of-consciousness voice memos for herself. She realized the tape could function as part of an art object. "I wanted to expand upon my own audio piece, and I wanted to build it similarly to how I build a painting," she says. "I find found materials, mix them with any material that I made and allow it to become this whole other work, creating this linear narrative." The result is a sequence lasting 16 minutes, 32 seconds that will be piped into the gallery's underground space.

Self says she resists overly psychoanalytical readings of her practice. "Often, people feel like when you're making Black art, it's because you are trying to work through the trauma of being Black. But that's not my intention," Self says. Instead, she projects her focus generations into the future. "You have a record to say that I was here."

<https://www.wsj.com/arts-culture/fine-art/tschabalala-self-cotton-mouth-interview-11603903577>