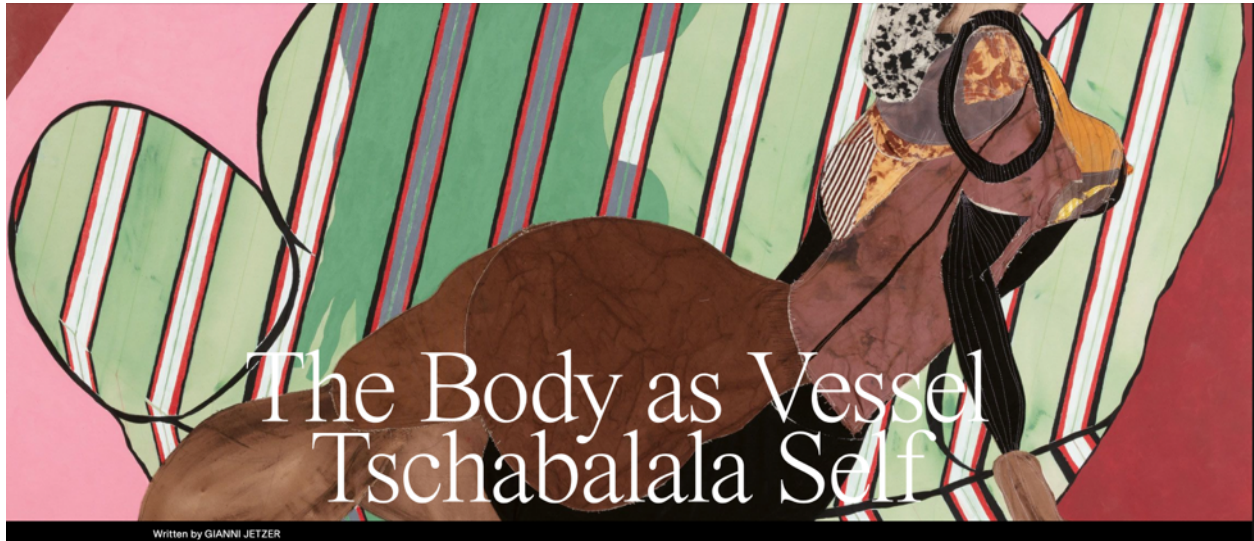


Gianni Jetzer, "The Body as Vessel Tschabalala Self," *Studio Magazine*, March 2023.



In a small group show dedicated to Florine -Stettheimer, the eccentric New York painter who, with an affectionate satirical eye, portrayed people and scenes in New York in the 1920s and '30s, I first saw a painting by Tschabalala Self. It caught my eye through the palpable tension that inhabited it. The content was sparse, with nothing depicted on the canvas other than a male figure with giant hands, shielded by an adolescent tree whose branches resembled an umbrella, and open flames flickering out of the man's fingers, ready to flare up the scene. In Self's signature style, the body was composed of pieces of fabric—some found, some painted, and some dyed—hastily sewn to the surface of the canvas. Akin to a shirtsleeve coming to life, it wasn't obvious where the body stopped and where the garment began. Threads were partly hanging loose from the surface, the creation process showing its seams, as it were. Despite the simplified traits, the man's facial expression and bodily posture were highly expressive and triggered instant empathy. He impersonated an ultimate, and literal, Firestarter: an energetic figure, charismatic but trapped in splendid isolation.

To pair Self's work with Stettheimer's was an unexpected, refreshing move, even if not the most obvious one. The nature of the latter's faux-naïve paintings of party scenes—she was once called a "jazz age saloniste"—is entirely different from Self's vision. In addition, the two oeuvres are almost a century apart. Stettheimer was raised on the Upper West Side in a bourgeois household and later held salons near Gramercy Park. Simultaneously, magic was happening a couple of blocks north in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance, the most critical movement for African American culture. When asked for her primary source of inspiration, Self names Faith Ringgold, the artist who devoted her paintings to themes of the civil rights movement and is also known for her

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narrative quilts. The two artists have a lot in common: both were born in Harlem and grew up in households where tailoring was highly valued. Ringgold’s mother was a fashion designer, Self’s mother instructed tailors and upholsterers, so that they could pass the union entrance exam. Both had, through their upbringing, a solid connection to arts, crafts, and manual labor, and both eventually aspired to become artists. Ringgold witnessed the Harlem Renaissance as a child and had the chance to meet the most inspiring artists and musicians of her generation; figures such as Duke Ellington and Langston Hughes lived just around the corner. As an artist, operating in total isolation from the New York art scene at the time, with its downtown artist-run spaces and uptown galleries, she created a varied, multilayered work that, like no other, has given form and language to the lives of Black women in America.

In the 1990s, Ringgold began working on a new series called The French Collection. The series depicts the life of Willia Marie Simone (the artist’s alter ego), inspired partly by Ringgold’s grandmother. In this invented universe, Simone marries a wealthy Frenchman who dies shortly after their wedding, leaving her a vast fortune. Ringgold’s works show how Simone becomes a painter and how she subsequently meets France’s most famous artists, including Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, for both of whom she models. For instance, Ringgold’s Picasso’s studio (1991) shows Simone modeling for Picasso, while his famous Les Femmes d’Alger (O.K. R. 1965) forms the central background of the painting. The renowned and famously macho Spanish artist is depicted at the left margin of the canvas, standing bare-chested, taking measurements with a brush in his hand. Picasso’s male gaze is directed at the scene dominated by the young Black woman, whose body is positioned between the artist and one of his most renowned works, claiming her space in the studio and through that, eventually, in art history.

In search of inspiration, and after being impressed by an African sculpture Matisse had shown him in Gertrude Stein’s Paris apartment, Picasso visited the Trocadéro Museum of Ethnology in early 1907 with his friend, the artist André Derain. It was here that he first saw a wooden Fang head. Picasso later recounted that upon visiting the museum, he felt the connection between art and magic as a form of spirituality for the first time. Although African sculptures strongly influenced him, he never portrayed Black people in his paintings.

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The fictional scene that Ringgold brings to life, aptly described as “a -feminist-inflected ‘magic realist’ tale of a time-traveling Black woman,” addresses the lack of Black representation in Modernism. Ringgold introduces Simone into Picasso’s studio as an avatar to represent the experience of living in a Black female body, to overcome its -latent eradication and to counter its absence in art history. The contrast to the masked figures of *Les Demoiselles* in the background is evident. The African masks are a disguise that doesn’t match the racial identity of their bearers. But while *Les*

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Demoiselles are famously part of art history, -Simone is a mere visitor who might be asked to leave at any moment.

The serene expression on Simone's face seems counter to her rigorous posture, sitting upright with a straight back, at once strong and gracious. Ringgold seems to mimic the pose of an odalisque, the central figure in Orientalist, 19th-century painting, immortalized by French painters such as Eugène Delacroix and Jean-Léon Gérôme. Edward Said famously criticized such depictions, writing that the "Orient" shown in such works is fabricated and born out of the colonizer's Western perspective, establishing a hierarchy between an alluring, but underdeveloped East and a rational, superior, imperial West. Ringgold interferes with Picasso's artistic vision of "otherness," in his case African culture, by introducing her alter ego, thus undermining the narrative of Modernism with the precision of a weapon, introducing Black identity as an inherent subject in the avant-garde. In so doing she changes the status of Black people from invisibility to center stage.

This vital move has much to do with the practice of Self, who stresses how her gender and racial identity inform her work: "I navigate the world through the vessel of my body, which is a gendered body and a racialized body. All my experiences are dictated by my vehicle. It dictates my perception of others and also other people's perceptions of me. I've had a particular set of unique experiences completely tethered to my physicality. And when I do work about physicality in general, it's through the perspective of my experiences. My perspective is, just by default, one that speaks about my gender and race because that reality has touched every single experience I've had."

Departing from her body and the perceptions it engenders, Self creates figures she describes as avatars of Black womanhood. To borrow the words of Uri McMillan, who in his seminal book *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* introduced the term in the service of Black performance art: "... avatars are a means of highlighting and stretching subordinate roles available to Black women ... The efficacy of these avatars, in other words, is their agile ability to comment back on identity itself, to subvert the taken--for-granted rules for properly embodying a Black female body."

Self's works question the historically, culturally, and socially shaped ideas toward Black bodies that are surrounded by collective fantasies and have created a cultural niche in which exists our contemporary understanding of Black femininity. Her practice

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is dedicated to naming this phenomenon, setting new standards, and finally liberating the Black body from impeding and limiting readings.

In her paintings, Self depicts individuals or couples. Often, they seem to float in their own world, isolated against a monochromatic or patterned background. Her figures are not to be understood as portraits; they are composites of what she calls a pantheon of invented characters. They thus embody an existential condition and are emblematic of interpersonal dynamics. Consequently, Self doesn’t consider herself a portrait artist. All her figures are imaginary. Strong and defiant, they seem to stand up against a world that often does not acknowledge them as human beings. They proudly embody the beauty ideals of the African American community. In their voluptuousness, some figures seem to stem from a cosmic order, such as Candy (2021), the ultimate depiction of a Venus, an embodiment of the divine feminine. She presents her curvy figure as if it were a sculptural body. The striped fauteuil she reclines on is borrowed from Picasso’s painting *Femme aux cheveux jaunes* (Woman with Yellow Hair, 1931) thus creating a further metabolic reference within art history. In contrast to Ringgold, who placed her alter ego in Picasso’s studio, Self’s move is stealthy and nonchalant.

Interestingly, the shadow reaching across the divan does not match the form of the body on it and thus creates a presence, possibly evoking the attendance of a second person in the room. The furtive nature of the shadow creates a potentially romantic tension that is utterly different from Simone’s attendance in Picasso’s studio. In both cases, the body becomes a vessel; for Ringgold, through its presence, it corrects the narrative of history, while Self detaches the Black body from a system of classification and limitation in daily life, eventually turning it into a hyperbolic version of itself. The purpose of that isn’t so much to make it sexualized as more to allude to its power through being more than ordinary in its abundance, fleshiness, and vitality.

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Inside Out, Installation view at Kunstmuseum St.Gallen, Photo: Stefan Altenburger



Leisure Man in Checkered Shirt in Checkered Room, 2022



Leisure Man in Yellow Shirt in Blue Room, 2022

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Inside Out, Installation view at Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, Photo: Stefan Altenburger



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Faith Ringgold, *Picasso's Studio*, 1991, Acrylic on canvas with printed and tie-dyed fabric, 185.4 x 172.7 cm, Worcester Art Museum, MA, Charlotte E. W. Buffington, Fund 716226, Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York © Faith Ringgold / 2023, ProLitteris, Zurich

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Jeffrey Deitch, The Florine Stettheimer, Collapsed Time Salon, The Armory Show, March 2-6, 2017, Photo: Adam Reich. Courtesy of the artist and Jeffrey Deitch



Pablo Picasso, Women with Yellow Hair, 1931, Oil and Ripolin (text.) on canvas, 102.2 x 81.1 cm, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Thannhauser Collection, Gift, Justin K. Thannhauser, 1978, © 2018 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, © Succession Picasso / 2023, ProLitteris, Zurich



Tschabalala Self, Trees, 2017, Acrylic, colored pencil, and marker on canvas, 137.2 x 111.8 cm, Courtesy of the artist, Pilar Corrias, London, and Galerie Eva Presenhuber

<https://magazine.studio/article/the-body-as-vessel>

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