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Akili King, "Tschabalala Self on Her New Exhibition and Taking Up Space Through Her Artwork,"
Vogue, March 26, 2021.

VOGUE

ARTS

Tschabalala Self on Her New Exhibition and Taking Up Space Through Her Artwork

BY AKILI KING
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Tschabalala Self at her studio in New Haven, Connecticut Photo: Courtesy of Chris DeFonte

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When you look at Harlem-born artist Tschabalala Self's paintings, you are seeing, in no uncertain terms, her worldview. "My work has evolved a lot," the 30-year-old artist, who's been showcasing her work since 2015, tells *Vogue* via Zoom. "Ultimately, I'm using my own identity politics and lived experiences to tell larger, humanistic stories about desire, power, the potential for existentialism, and what that can mean for an individual or community," Self says. "I focus on my individual experience because that's the perspective I know the best."

These experiences are detailed in her new exhibition entitled "By My Self," on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art from March 28 until September 19. The show (and its name) are both inspired by Self's exploration of loneliness, which was heightened over the course of the pandemic. "It's a play on my last name and also my way of thinking about this year of solitude," she says. "Whether it's loneliness in terms of being by oneself, or even the concept of feeling lonely within a household or group."



Tschabalala Self Photo: Courtesy of Chris DeFonte

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While the events of the past year have shaped the show, a number of the pieces predate the pandemic (some of her work dates back to 2016). The show itself was a bit of a long-term goal. Curator Cecilia Wichmann first approached Self with the idea of showcasing at the Baltimore Museum of Art after seeing her 2017 exhibition, "Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon," at the New Museum. "I was really excited about the opportunity," Self says. "We've been trying to pull together a narrative to compile existing works and new works that respond to my overall practice as a whole." The Baltimore Museum is also home to the largest Matisse collection in the world, which plays a key role in her show.

Self created a visual response to the Matisse piece *Two Women*, formerly known as *Two Negresses*. This sculpture is based on a photograph, named *Young Tuareg Girls*, from a 19th-century French erotic magazine, which Self says fetishizes the African female body. "The image is pseudo-pornographic and designed for a white male gaze," says Self. "I think that Matisse was attempting to complicate that dynamic in the sculpture, but it wasn't fully complicated. It's perhaps his way of giving them individuality. But it still copies the aesthetics of the original work. And in a way, the scale of the sculpture makes them diminutive."



Two Women 2, 2021; *Two Women*, 2019; *Two Women 3*, 2021, in "Tschabalala Self: By My Self" at the Baltimore Museum of Art The Baltimore Museum of Art. Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London. Photo: Courtesy of Mitro Hood

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Self created a three-part painting in response to the Matisse sculpture, playing on its title: *Two Women*, *Two Women 2*, and *Two Women 3*. There is a deliberate evolution in Self’s three-part painting. In her painting version of *Two Women*, she has both women facing the viewer. “They’re taking up space. They’re not there for the edification of the viewer; it’s more like the viewer is almost intruding on their space,” she says. In *Two Women 2*, Self lingered on the “formal dynamics” at play, which sees one woman facing the viewer and one facing another direction. “I was trying to deal with the potential of their individuality by playing with the materials I used to create each,” she says. “And I also played with the shadows. I feel shadows represent the self that is not easily accessible.”

For *Two Women 3*, both subjects are wearing clothing and they’re placed on a wooden floor. “Clothing in art pieces, to me, ground subjects in reality. They’re set within a domestic space as well,” Self says. “Neither is looking at the viewer. One is whispering to the other—they have a secret that the viewer can’t access. This aspect makes the piece transcend the conversation and brings them outside of the reality of Matisse, and into their own world. I feel like most people will draw their own conclusions by looking at these, but to me, the women in *Two Women 3* are impenetrable.”

This idea of self-possession, she says, is fundamental. “The most important thing I’ve learned as an artist is to follow my instincts,” she says. “I try to remind myself that, if I have an idea or opinion, maybe not many people will share it, but at least there will be one other person out there that it will resonate with—and that’s really all you need to create, to feel like you’re part of the larger social and potentially spiritual network.”

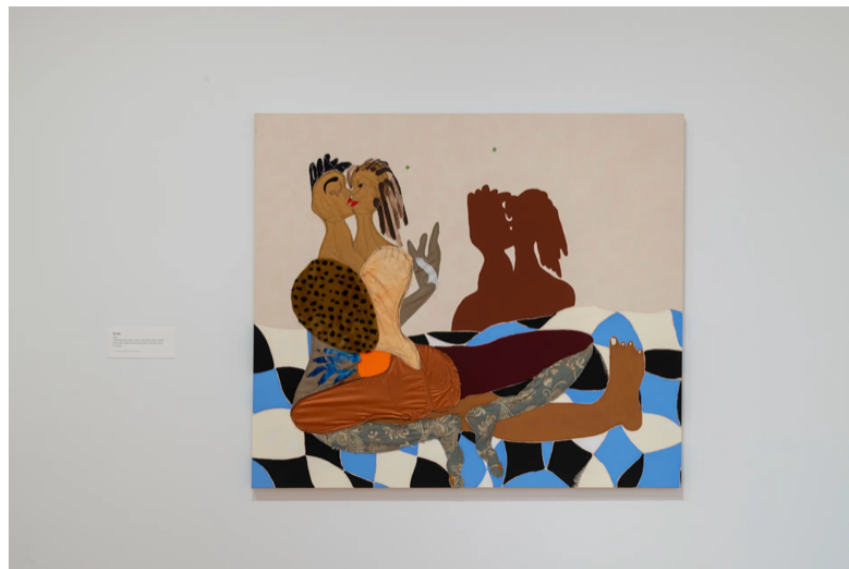
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The Baltimore Museum of Art. Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London. Photo:  Courtesy of Mitro Hood

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Chop, 2016, "Tschabalala Self: By My Self," Baltimore Museum of Art



The Baltimore Museum of Art. Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London. Photo:  Courtesy of Mitro Hood

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Sunday, 2016, "Tschabalala Self: By My Self," Baltimore Museum of Art

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Procession, 2019–2021, "Tschabalala Self: By My Self," Baltimore Museum of Art



The Baltimore Museum of Art. Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London. Photo: 
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Big Toe, 2019, "Tschabalala Self: By My Self," Baltimore Museum of Art

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