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Gazelle Mba, "For Tschabalala Self, Art Is Romantic" *The New York Times Style Magazine*, March 18, 2026.



SOLO SHOW

For Tschabalala Self, Art Is Romantic

The painter and sculptor discusses neighborhood murals, nonlinear storytelling and her commission for the New Museum, a 13-foot-tall rendering of a couple mid-embrace.

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By Gazelle Mba

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In [Solo Show](#), we ask Black artists to curate a list of three treasured works that they’ve encountered or made, and to reflect on how their practice connects to a broader art lineage.

In her large-scale paintings and sculptures, the artist Tschabalala Self makes monuments to the everyday: a woman shopping at the bodega, one relaxing on a futon and another holding a yoga pose. Most often, her subjects are Black women at rest or play, depicted either nude or dressed in vibrant, patterned clothing. Elements of her paintings are made from fabric collage and oil paint, and her sculptures are typically cast in bronze and have a richly worked patina. For her newest piece, “Art Lovers” (2026), Self worked with aluminum for the first time to depict a Black couple embracing, their mouths cracked open into wide smiles. The 13-foot-tall sculpture will be installed on the [facade of the New Museum on the Lower East Side](#) to commemorate the institution’s expanded campus and reopening, which will take place this week. The titular lovers’ limbs are comically exaggerated — a technique Self employs frequently across her practice and that gives the appearance of a body straining exuberantly against the limits of a mold or canvas. Here, Self discusses three artworks that are meaningful to her.

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A 2012 photo of one of the many murals by the artist Franco the Great that cover the metal security gates of businesses along 125th Street in Harlem. Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

The first work that inspired her

Franco the Great's painted murals on the gates of 125th street that he started in 1978

As a kid, I was inspired by the gates that lined commercial storefronts in Harlem and had been painted by [Franco Gaskin](#), who goes by Franco the Great. The figures in these murals were mythical, glamorous, Black and beautiful. One of my favorites shows Nelson Mandela with portraits of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Barack Obama. The paintings had this aesthetic language that appears across Black American portraiture: They were rooted in realism but also idealization. They looked like photographs you might've seen, but they were rendered with the affection and charm that can only come from a painterly gesture. I feel like my own practice is grounded in that same kind of cultural symbolism.

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A clip from Arthur Jafa's seven-and-a-half-minute film composed to a large extent of found footage spliced together. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York/Rome

A work she returns to again and again

Arthur Jafa's "Love is the Message, the Message is Death" (2016)

Although this is a video work, I read it as a painting — as I understand paintings to be, ultimately, the juxtaposition of two things: one brushstroke next to another, one color truly understood only in the context of the color placed beside it. In “Love is the Message, the Message is Death,” narrative comes by way of juxtaposition rather than linear storytelling. The clips were edited together to play in quick succession, creating a cascading effect. I return to the work because its impact on me is not merely cerebral but also physical and emotional. I’m drawn to art that you remember more for how it made you feel than for what it had to say — those two things aren’t necessarily opposed, but the feeling comes first.

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“Art Lovers” (2026) on the facade of the New Museum in New York. Courtesy of the New Museum.

A maquette of the work. Courtesy of the artist

A new work of her own that she’s excited about

“Art Lovers” (2026)

My commission for the New Museum’s reopening will be installed close to where the museum’s original and new buildings meet. The piece isn’t fully three-dimensional — it’s hinged onto the facade via an armature and looks almost like a relief. I hadn’t worked with aluminum before, but the sculpture required a certain lightness. Painting the aluminum — as opposed to applying a traditional patina as I would with bronze — allowed me to bring that visual language into the work in a more controlled manner. The sculpture was inspired by my painting “[Madly](#)” (2022), which depicts two lovers in a tender, yet somewhat manic, embrace. I imagine the couple in “Art Lovers” to be museum patrons, possibly admiring one of their favorite works.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/18/t-magazine/tschabalala-self-new-museum.html>

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