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Tschabalala Self Makes a Monument Out of the Mundane

From her Hudson Valley studio, the artist creates soft paintings and riveting sculptures that transform everyday encounters into imagined worlds of color, fabric, and emotion.

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Dress LOEWE

PHOTOGRAPHY Deirdre Lewis

STYLED BY Sharifa Morris

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Tschabalala Self has a way of seeing people. With buoyant woven textiles and expressive bodily collages, the 36-year-old artist builds figures through an emotive, intuitive process. Like fleeting moments that occupy an outsized place in memory, her works resist a literal account of the world around her. Instead, she creates energetic characters guided by a deeply personal, subjective logic. "I don't consider a complete body proportionally," says Self. "I see certain points of a person are emphasized."

Across saturated colors and vibrantly patterned textiles, Self renders instinctive portraits from assorted fabrics. Anatomical boundaries dissolve into internalized interpretations of being. A figure with larger-than-life eyes stitched onto a canvas, for instance, may stem from meeting someone whose face lingered in her mind. "I am trying to capture how I visually and mentally process people around me," she says.

Born in Harlem and now based in New York's Hudson Valley, Self filters the visible through a deeply personal lens. "Bodies are compartmentalized," she says of the everyday encounters that inspire the anonymous protagonists of her paintings. Hovering between the memory of a passerby and the imagined possibility of someone she has never met, Self weaves figures that feel both invented and strikingly familiar. A fragmented pair of limbs or an exaggerated facial expression reflects her belief that "people are more abstract than they are literal." The resulting works offer a playful meditation on scale, perception, and corporality.

Self graduated from the Yale School of Art's MFA program in 2015. By the end of 2019, her textured paintings of Black subjects had already been featured in solo exhibitions at institutions such as the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and New York's MoMA PS1. In just a few years, she established herself as one of the most closely watched artists of the last decade. Today, her work resides in dozens of public collections, from Beirut's Aïshti Foundation, to Shanghai's Yuz Museum, to Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

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Top and skirt LOUIS VUITTON

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That rapid ascent has also opened a new chapter in her practice: sculpture. Working in three dimensions has allowed Self to further hone her intuitive approach to the body. Visually exuberant yet emotionally familiar, her latest commission currently dresses the facade of the New Museum's expansion, designed by the Dutch architecture firm OMA.Art Lovers (2026) depicts a grinning young Black couple, embracing cheek to cheek. Self's characteristic twist on physical proportions is evident in the man's oversized hands, while the woman's vivid floral stockings climb the museum's metal mesh facade in bursts of color. "There is a menagerie of feelings," says Self, who delights in imagining a real couple pausing beneath the sculpture, looking up at her lovers with shared feeling before stepping inside to explore the rest of the museum together. Self finds joy in celebrating the singular power of public sculpture to foster unexpected intimacy. "Even though the work is located in a shared space, it's possible to have a private experience because so many different feelings can occur."

A career-defining commission at one of her hometown's most coveted institutions, Self's New Museum installation foreshadows her most ambitious public project to date. For the prestigious Fourth Plinth Commission—widely regarded as the U.K.'s highest-profile public art commission—her newest sculpture will occupy the famed empty pedestal in the heart of London's Trafalgar Square. Chosen by a panel of British artists and arts professionals before being confirmed through a public vote, *Lady in Blue* (2026) portrays a young Black woman in mid-stride whose poise and self-possession make her feel both singular and universal, as though she could be at home in London or any other major metropolis. With the commission, Self becomes only the second American artist in the initiative'stwo-decade history to receive the honor, following Michael Rakowitz, whose 2018 installation, *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*, commemorated an ancient Assyrian monument destroyed by ISIS.

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Dress and shoes DIOR

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Instead of focusing on an historic individual or event, *Lady in Blue* is strikingly ordinary. Self's sculpture captures what appears to be an otherwise unremarkable moment of daily life. Her vibrant blue dress and mules are paired with lapis lazuli–inspired jewelry—a color Self chose for its ability to evoke something "timeless with a transnational significance," while recalling the honor and prestige historically associated with the pigment derived from lapis lazuli in Western painting. Observation was central to the work's conception. "I imagined a contemporary Londoner, a fellow pedestrian, who could be walking in your periphery," she explains. With her hair swept into a bun, glass jewelry catching the light, and both arms extended, the figure conveys the cadence of someone in motion without sacrificing elegance or autonomy. Perhaps she is headed out for the evening; perhaps she is simply moving through the city, fully inhabiting her body and quietly aware of her own presence. The work's deliberately "vague narrative," Self says, invites viewers to imagine their own stories. "I'm always interested in the ways people build their own worlds around my work and see a part of themselves."

Whether sourcing used fabrics to sew into her paintings or sketching the attire of a monumental sculpture, Self employs clothing as an essential tool in constructing identity. Fashion, she says, helps "build a self-image," though she describes herself modestly as "a fashion audience, not an expert. The humble disclaimer belies her growing presence within the industry: she designed a patchwork leather bag for Louis Vuitton's inaugural "ArtyCapucines" collection in 2019, and this year, she served as one of the co-chairs of the Met Gala, attending in a light blue Brandon Blackwood gown inspired by Edgar Degas's ballerinas.

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Jacket and dress COMME DES GARÇONS

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Self-fashioning of figures, in paint, fabric, or bronze, becomes a language of visibility and intention. "If I saw this girl on the street, I'd actually notice her," Self says of the monument coming to Trafalgar Square—a site originally conceived to commemorate military victory and one that has since become synonymous with public assembly and political demonstrations, including protests against Apartheid. She describes the work as a kind of "social experiment," a litmus test that asks what happens when an elegant, contemporary Black woman is elevated onto one of Britain's most visible pedestals. The answer, Self suggests, lies precisely in the understated nature of her subject: "Her presence is in fact very quotidian and mundane."

Self has already faced the public's racial bias and assumptions about who is deemed worthy of commemoration—and, fittingly, this moment of confrontation happened in the U.K. In 2022, she unveiled *Seated*, her first public sculpture, at Coal Drops Yard in King's Cross. The 10-foot-tall work depicts a seated young Black woman, wearing a yellow dress, matching boots, and a wide-brimmed hat. After its installation, the sculpture was later moved two hours away, to the seafront at the De La Warr Pavilion, where, a month later, it was vandalized with white paint in what was widely understood as a racially motivated attack.

"It showed that Black existence is politicized daily by the society at large, even when they are shown simply sitting," Self says. What happened next, however, revealed the true power of public art: Hundreds of local residents came together to remove the paint and raise funds for the sculpture's professional restoration. Initially slated for display through October 2023, its residency has been repeatedly extended; *Seated* continues to hold its space on the De La Warr lawn today, a symbol of community resilience that anchors the pavilion's outdoor programming.

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Top and skirt DIOTIMA

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Dress and belt MARNI Ring TSCHABALALA'S OWN

Self continues to communicate with her audience through the quiet joy of the mundane. As her figures dress up and move through life, she animates them through gestures that reveal the emotional architecture of their bodies. With a tender eye and a rigorous hand, she stitches characters whose exaggerated proportions feel psychologically, rather than anatomically, true. "I look at art history's movements," she says, "but I am getting most of my inspiration from personalities I meet and the ways people self-anesthetize."

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That philosophy carries through to her latest body of textile paintings, inspired by pedestrians she observed in London and New York. Presented in September at Pilar Corrias's Mayfair gallery, a 20-minute walk from Trafalgar Square, the works build on the urban encounters that also gave rise to *Lady in Blue*. "Think of a couple from Fitzrovia or a girl from Harlem," Self says of her starting points. But, she insists, "They are not real people, all imagined around interiors they would inhabit and worlds they might belong to."



Courtesy of Tschabalala Self.

PRODUCED BY: Chloe Asnes

HAIR AND MAKEUP: Ashtyn Thurbs

PHOTO ASSISTANT: Thalia Romanos

https://www.lofficielusa.com/art/tschabalala-self-interview-profile-quotes-artist-photos-exhibition-nyc