

August 10, 2021 - Tschabalala Self is a Harlem-born painter based in New Haven. She received her BA from Bard in 2012 and her MFA from Yale in 2015. Her work combines painting, textiles, printmaking, video, sculpture, and other media. She writes, "My current body of work is concerned with the iconographic significance of the Black female body in contemporary culture. My work explores the emotional, physical and psychological impact of the Black female body as icon, and is primarily devoted to examining the intersectionality of race, gender and sexuality." Here she discusses why putting in the work is never a waste of time, using your memories as inspiration, transcending politics, and why a studio space should be like a fresh canvas.



As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2236 words.

Tags: Art, Process, Focus, Multi-tasking, Inspiration, Success.

# On not being afraid of hard work

**I read an article where you were compared very favorably to Kerry James Marshall, and I saw a piece where Jeffrey Deitch was talking about a group show at Art Basel where your work drew more attention than works by Warhol and Picasso. Is it easier or harder to create amid all of this attention?**

For me it's been easier, but when I speak to some of my peers about this kind of phenomenon, they'll say it makes it more difficult. Not everyone has the same opinion about it. For me, it's been easier. The biggest challenge for me with sharing my work with other people initially, was a lot of the messages in it were lost on the audiences I was showing it to. This was in an institutional context. I feel liberated by being in a larger community of artists. For me, the art world is a larger community than the one I came from as an art student. So, in my mind, it's more democratic. There's more opportunity for you to meet like-minded people that can appreciate your work. I feel liberated by that, so it actually gives me more confidence.

But I can imagine how that kind of situation can make other people feel smaller—like now they have all this weight on them, pressure to perform or a pressure to do the same thing or to do a certain thing. For me, it gives me the confidence to say, "Okay, my work does have a cultural value, and other people are excited about this, and it's doing something uplifting for other people, not just for myself." The work is cathartic and helpful for me, but when other people respond well to it, it gives me confidence to try more things and to keep going.

It can do the exact opposite for other people depending on personality type. It often depends on what your intentions are. Not everyone has the same intentions for themselves—like what they want for their art career or what they want for themselves or their life. You have to be honest with yourself about what your true motivations are.

I want to share my ideas with as many people as possible. I believe in my ideas. Most people believe in the ideas they have. Most people think, like I do, that the ideas they have are true. I'm not unique in that, but I do believe in my ideas, and I would like for other people to at least be exposed to them because they might agree.



Chandelier 2, Gouache, color pencil, xerox, paper, plastic, oil, acrylic and flashe on canvas, 2017

**Your works involve a number of mediums, but you refer to them as paintings.**

I call the works painting because they're using a painting language. They're on canvas, they're stretched, and, also, I think my understanding of a painting is one of color relationships or the relationship between different objects on a pictorial plane. If you're using actual paint or using objects or items that have embedded color and assembling them like an assemblage, I think that it can still constitute as a painting. It's conceptually brought up as a painting, and it's using the same materials that are traditionally used in painting, which is primarily just a canvas and a stretched canvas.

For me, this has been a more productive way to work, because I can't achieve the aesthetics I'm interested in when using traditional painting techniques. Also, conceptually, it doesn't fit the overall intention of the project. The point of the project is to create new narratives, new ways of seeing, new ways of understanding. So, to use a subversive technique, one which I feel is my own, I can say something that's sincerely coming from me and that isn't derivative. It helps me avoid a lot of derivative actions or statements in the overall practice.

**Do you see yourself as a storyteller?**

I do. More and more as I go forward, as the work has become more based in narrative, I'm starting to think of the painting not so much as portraits, but as vignettes. In that sense, I do think I'm telling stories about the work, but if I was to use an analogy, the paintings wouldn't be so much like films as documentaries.

**You've referred to the characters in your works as avatars of yourself. The word, "avatar," makes me think of online culture, but your work has a much more timeless feel. When you use that word are you thinking of online identity at all?**

I do intentionally use that word, to ground the practice in the present. I think anyone dealing with figuration or identity now would have to imagine how that work would function in a virtual space, because so much of identity politics is centered around the internet. Also thinking about variation in how people consume pictures of one another, how people understand their bodies, and other people's bodies. A lot of that has to do with internet culture, all the way from pornography to social media. The internet is used to understand other people, in every aspect.

**You've introduced video and animation into your practice, as well as sculptural elements. Do you imagine constantly shifting what you're doing? Artists often have a practice where they stick to one specific approach, but it seems like you're not afraid to experiment with new paths.**

I'm definitely open to trying out whatever's going to help me to achieve my goals on a particular project. Like, with some of the projects, the paintings are enough to articulate my intentions and tell the stories around the characters and express whatever ideas I was thinking about at the time. Other projects, given the context in which they're shown or the subject matter, the paintings may not be the most efficient way to go about talking about that. So then I have to try other ways of working.

Depending on what the purpose of the project is, conceptually or formally, I have to tailor how I'm working to match the needs of the project. I'm definitely open to using any kind of medium to do that. If I'm working more and more and if I'm seeing that the work is resonating other people, I have more

confidence to try different things.



Coco, Oil on paper, 2013

**Something I've noticed with younger artists, is that many of them will try different approaches. There's less specialization. It's almost like there's so much available at one time in the digital age that it doesn't seem taboo to try out new things.**

I think there's more fluidity between practices now. It seems like younger artists, in general, are more open to not over-identifying with a particular way of working. Maybe they see themselves more as artists first and then the mediums as tools. The mediums don't necessarily define them.

**What does a studio need to be an ideal space to make work?**

I make my work wherever I happen to be, but my studio's the best for me to work. I think what will honestly make it easier for people to have a productive studio is that you probably shouldn't have a sofa in your studio, and you probably also shouldn't have internet in your studio. I don't have either of those things in my studio. That helps me be productive.

I like having a lot of open space. My studio kinda looks like a storage unit. I'm not really into having a lot of things here, just a lot of big open space.

Every time you walk into your studio, you should have that feeling of a fresh canvas. The studio should be a space that's constantly evolving or changing or being made up or remade with the work.

I also think that artists should be open to having other artists sublet or lease or rent their studio. I love when I go out of town or my friends are in my studio because they always leave something behind that completely changes my practice. They'll leave a different kind of sewing machine or a different kind of paint or something like that. It's like, "Oh, wow, I can use this, too." It's exposing me to something completely different that I wouldn't have thought of using. I miss that from school. You don't really have that experience when you're working on your own.

**There's a political element to your work. You've talked about how it's inherently politicized.**

The work is inherently politicized because it's concerning the Black body and the Black body is culturally politicized, but I don't want to concede that the work is political because it reduces the Black experience into... I think everyone's life is so much more valuable and interesting and important than whatever social constraints are being placed upon them. I don't think a Black child being born is about them being a political figure in this country. They're made to be one, but for my own sanity, my own self-esteem, I can't concede to that being an absolute truth.

People confuse an issue that's being placed upon you with an issue that you're born with. These are not existential issues and I think that there needs to be more space for Black thought, Black life outside of a political context. When you're constantly politicizing someone, only seeing their body within the context of a system, you're reverting to kind of a Colonial mindset. It leaves no space for anyone's humanity, if you constantly see them as someone who's stuck within a problem.

The work is political because it's politicized; politicized bodies are featured in the work. I'm a political person because if I wasn't a political person, that would affect my safety and my well-being in

the country. But that's not why I'm making the work. I'm making the work to leave a document of my experience, leave a document of the experience of people who are like me.

Politics change. I'm really trying to have my work land on a truth because the truth I think will be the same no matter what things are like in the future.



Loner, Fabric, flashe, and acrylic paint on canvas, 2016

**When you're making work, what do you find to be valuable resources? If you're ever working and find yourself stuck creatively, what are things you find inspiration in?**

I think a lot about my own memories. Especially memories of people close to me. I think about moments of happiness, moments of sadness. I look into myself or into my own mind and try to remember something that was of significance to me.

And from those, I try to remember how I felt or what I felt from interactions. I'm usually able to get some inspiration from those places and move forward with a project or an idea.

**Is it ever okay to abandon a project?**

I like to keep working on things until they work. Because of the way my practice is, it's easy for me to cut up something or cut back into it and rearrange it and use it. There's never any lost time. If I work on something and I'm not happy with it, and then I go back into it and destroy or rework it, all that time was just building up material.

For me that's very much how I try to think about my own life, too. There's never any time lost. Even something you might think of as a mistake or as a failure is really just you collecting material or information that could be rearranged or re-applied differently to get a successful outcome.

**Because you can keep cutting, how do you know when a piece is done?**

When I look at a piece and I feel like it's done. Usually I feel like everything is sitting where it should be, and nothing's out of place. If I turn my back to the work and turn back quickly, nothing stands out as wrong. All the different elements seem content where they are. Nothing is too off and nothing is too perfectly placed. Everything has to be where it should be.

**How do you avoid burnout when you're finishing one project and moving to the next?**

It's hard. I can't say I have avoided burnout. For me this is the main thing I do, my work. You have to be okay with being alone a lot. You have to be okay with not being stressed out from not having worked. You have to be ok with just resting and not going out because you're tired. You have to be okay to just go workout or make yourself dinner so you feel better. I think that all that helps.

Here are five people I've been thinking about in preparation for my new show which investigates the aesthetics of a NYC hallmark, the bodega. Examining this space has brought back so many memories, and these figures personify the sentiments that accompany them:

Tracey Camilla Johns

Abel Ferrara

Rosie Perez

OBD

My older siblings Sayida, Kolikwe, Ramogi and Princetta

Name

Tschabalala Self

Vocation

Visual Artist

Fact

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