

Tschabalala Self has become one of the most significant artists reinventing figurative painting today. Her dynamic and expressive style of painting explores Black life and, in particular, the experiences of Black women. She creates her unique style from the syncretic use of painting, printmaking, craft traditions, and a process of imagining and assembling characters that is formally inventive and politically astute. In process and presentation, Self's colorful and exaggerated characters are intentionally multi-dimensional.

*Scarlet* is a visually captivating painting from 2018. In the painting Self slowly builds her Black femme character by combining acrylic paint, oil pastels, and fabric on canvas. Scarlet is by definition something that is a vibrant red color or a woman who is considered immoral or sinful. Self's witty sense of humor is evident in the titles to her paintings; she enjoys playing with double entendres - words or phrases that are open to two interpretations, one of which is usually risqué. Black women's sexuality has long been seen as something other than their own - either a product of patriarchal forces, that is subordinate, or capitalist consumerism, namely, exploitable. Self embraces her character's provocative body language and celebrates her defiant gaze. By seeing and expressing Black women's sexuality in a positive light, the artist redefines feminist agency for a younger generation.

More importantly, Self's figures are literally and figuratively the sum of many parts and this unique formal language is inseparable from the artists' belief in Black people as multi-dimensional beings with infinitely complex stories. She expresses this complexity by drawing on color, composition, and the layering of different materials but the specific content of individual or collective experience remains opaque, private, and inaccessible to the viewer. As much as the artist makes a wealth of Black experiences visible, she simultaneously asserts an opacity of meaning in opposition to the hyper-legibility of Black identities.

At once autonomous and linked to everything else, Tschabalala Self's characters are just as much a part of the world as a distinct picture of it.

-Natasha Becker, Curator of African Art  
de Young Museum



Tschabalala Self, *Scarlet*, 2018.  
Photo: Craig Smith