



Zandile Tshabalala, *The act of self love: masking*, 2021. Photo: Craig Smith

In emerging artist Zandile Tshabalala's lusciously chromatic paintings, Black women are pictured basking in moments of rejuvenation, self-care, and tenderness. Born in Soweto, South Africa, Tshabalala became motivated to negate the erasure of Black histories and subjectivities in Western art as it has traditionally been taught. In art school, she questioned the limited and often problematic roles occupied by Black women in canonical works of art, in which such figures are commonly included as servants or concubines within a Eurocentric narrative framework. Aligning herself with artists such as Kerry James Marshall and Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Tshabalala seeks to counter such images by creating scenes that convey a sense of liberation, beauty, and visual fantasy. Her sitters are unabashedly seductive and confident, luxuriating within boldly patterned interior spaces or lush tropical environments inspired by the Surrealist dreamscapes of Henri Rousseau.

In *The act of self love: masking* (2021), a woman stands in her towel within a majestic gold-and-black bathroom, applying a white face mask to her ebony skin. We view her from behind, yet through the vanity mirror she looks back—meeting our gaze with a calm and consenting acknowledgement. Ensuring her subject's agency through her natural command of the space she occupies, Tshabalala subverts the many voyeuristic depictions of nude female bathers that populate centuries of European painting, too often overlaid with Orientalist or colonial fantasies. Yet, as writer and curator Azu Nwagbogu has noted, the artist does not merely reverse the exploitative power dynamics evident throughout art history, but rather eschews them entirely, creating a world that "feels safe and intimate" for subjects and viewers alike.

-Dr. Allison K. Young, Assistant Professor of Art History
Louisiana State University