

Kaleidoscope of Being

on *Tschabalala Self: Skin Tight*

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‘I want to breathe life into the figures—to create something that feels more real than reality itself.’

– Tschabalala Self

Tschabalala Self’s exhibition, *Skin Tight*, at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) marks a significant milestone in her career—her first solo presentation in Australia. The exhibition premieres 15 newly commissioned works across a series of luminous and immersive spaces where meditations on identity, memory, and representation unfold. Born in 1990, in Harlem, New York City, with family roots in New Orleans, Self draws on the textures of the natural environment, her community, music, and cultural memory to stitch together a kaleidoscopic universe that exists between reality and fantasy.



At the core of Tschabalala Self’s practice is a continual search for meaning, as she embraces the flaws, ruptures, and contradictions of life. For Self, mistakes are not hidden but made visible, becoming the fabric of both her art and what it means to be human. Working with textiles and paint, she employs an expanded form of collage that pushes the body beyond its physical form. Stitched and painted figures index the complexity of lived experience, where a single moment can contain multiple histories, associations, and contradictions. The beauty Self creates from these layers is not surface but substance; an intelligent device that deserves attention, empathy, and care.

Self's journey as an artist began as a child, when she recalls looking to the core of the family and using art as a way of making sense of the world around her. Even in these early works made at a very young age, we get a sense of her audacious style where characters represent an amalgamation of her memories, and collage and assemblage are a key approach to interpreting the world as she sees it. *Turkey*, is a particularly exquisite early work that gives a profound insight into how she constructs a vision of daily life and her unique ability to create, from fragments, something that is greater than the sum of its parts.



Tschabalala Self's figures are not portraits in the traditional sense but composites—layered beings who hold both vulnerability and strength. Ambiguity and liminality are embraced, with Self intentionally leaning into the unknowability of life. Art is not only an act of creation but also a process of inquiry for the artist—a way of grappling with history and expressing what means to be alive. The nuance of her work offers a counterpoint to a media culture that routinely disseminates images of Black and brown bodies as starved, broken, or in pain. Self presents the collaged body as whole, whereby fragmentation is not an act of violence or rupture but a refraction of the inner self—transformed, infinite, and eternal.

Self expands painting into new dimensions through a practice that blurs boundaries between representation, materiality, and lived experience. The hardwood floors that appear in many of her domestic interiors recall the work of pioneering African American painter Horace Pippin, among the first to acknowledge the quotidian beauty of Black domestic life. Self is also positioned within a lineage of Black women artists like Faith Ringgold and Dindga McCannon, who have similarly utilised textiles within expanded painting practices, with a specific focus on female experience and representation. By drawing on this rich heritage, Self situates her explorations of vulnerability and desire within a broader history of Black representation in art. This connection not only acknowledges the past but also amplifies the voices of those who have paved the way for contemporary dialogues around identity and creativity.

At the centre of *Skin Tight*, Self extends her core thinking and processes into three dimensions with *Soft Kiss* 2023. The larger-than-life sculptural figures command presence while retaining an intimate connection to her painterly universe. ‘I really wanted to see if I could push the formal aspects of the painted works and make them fully three-dimensional’, she explains. Like within her painting, Self points out that attention to the surface of the sculpture is paramount, ‘There’s quite a lot of attention given to the stitching’, and highlights ‘it’s not just functional, there are decorative stitches throughout’. Self’s consideration extends into the spatial in a heightened way with *Soft Kiss*, as sculptural figures share the same physical space as the viewer, effectively collapsing the distance between art and audience.

‘The purpose of having these sculptures in the exhibition is so they can exist in the same realm as the viewer... to shift relationship from viewer and painting, observer and object, and to name the exhibition space as the figure’s universe’.

– Tschabalala Self



Soft Kiss and surrounding paintings in Gallery 1 explore the charged dynamics of desire, observation, and domestic intimacy, probing the dimensions of both physical and psychological interiors. Take *Candy* 2021, where a female figure reclines prostrate in a darkened interior she is nude as a mysterious presence appears in the doorway. Light spills through the entrance, creating a moment suspended between anticipation and uncertainty. The title alludes to consumption, availability, and perceived desirability—suggesting either reward or indulgence. Is this figure coming or going? Is this encounter warm, cold, or neutral? Self deliberately leaves these narratives open-ended, allowing viewers to project their own experiences and interpretations onto the scene.



Tschabalala Self, *Blue Woman* 2025. Courtesy the artist, Pilar Corrias, London, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / Vienna and Petzel Gallery, New York.



Tschabalala Self, *Candy* 2021. Courtesy the artist and Longlati Foundation

Blue Woman 2025, one of Tschabalala Self's new works for *Skin Tight*, portrays a dignified older woman—proud, matriarchal, and deeply present in her physicality. Suspended within a spiralling domestic setting, her posture suggests longing, vulnerability, and unspoken desire. Self observes, 'She's quite languid in her movement... her hand extended out, beckoning for affection and assistance'. The figure is situated in a field of spiralling floral stamps that subsequently take on psychological dimensions, suggesting unrest and tumult. At her throat is a cyanotype of activist Angela Davis, lending the figure a 'voice', and perhaps signalling to her resilience, power, or resistance. Speaking to *Blue Woman*, Self explains, 'To be blue can be to be sad, to be melancholy', an emotional realm central to the work. Yet the work resists pathologising depression and melancholia by recognising turbulence and turmoil as part of shared human life—and rest and acceptance as forms of resistance.

'When people are having one feeling, what they're actually having is many, many thoughts, an infinite number of thoughts, associations, and memories, all colliding at once'.

– Tschabalala Self



Tschabalala Self, *Chest* 2020. Courtesy the artist and Longlati Foundation.

Tschabalala Self, *Lady in Mirror* 2024. Courtesy the artist, Pilar Corrias, London, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / Vienna and Petzel Gallery, New York.

Tschabalala Self, *The Exhibitionist* 2023. Courtesy the artist, Pilar Corrias, London, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / Vienna and Petzel Gallery, New York.

Presented alongside one another, *Chest* 2020, *Lady in Mirror* 2024, and *The Exhibitionist* 2023, are the three large-scale paintings portraying moments of self-reflection and contemplation within domestic spaces to stage an investigation into physical and psychological interiors. *Chest* turns to the quiet poetry of the everyday. Tschabalala Self describes her depiction of a man: ‘The figure is vulnerable in this scene as he takes off his shoe and leans against his dresser’, seemingly absorbed in a moment of solitude. Self goes on to reflect, ‘These are the moments when you realise a lover’s beauty or uniqueness’, speaking to how mundane gestures can hold profound emotional truth, capturing vulnerability, exhaustion, and the intimacy of shared life.

Lady in Mirror 2024 offers a playful meditation on self-perception. A figure studies her own reflection, comically contorting herself in the elusive pursuit of self-knowledge. The work complicates the traditional association of mirrors with vanity, proposing instead that reflection can be both absurd and revealing—a site where identity slips between the metaphysical self and the corporeal body.

The Exhibitionist 2023 depicts a kneeling figure in a domestic setting before a blooming yellow flower. Meeting the viewer’s gaze while exposing one breast, she holds power in her conspicuous display. The flower becomes a mirror to her gesture—a symbol of beauty, sexuality, and desire. Self imagines this character as confidently presenting herself for an observer, her ease and self-assurance turning vulnerability into strength.



Tschabalala Self. *Adam and Eve* 2025. Courtesy the artist, Pilar Corrias, London, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / Vienna and Petzel Gallery, New York.

Tschabalala Self's *Adam and Eve* 2025 reimagines the biblical narrative of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden to explore the delicate balance between opposing forces. Hung against a bold black-and-white striped wall, the diptych amplifies Tschabalala Self's interest in duality—opposites held in tension. She explains, 'Similar to a checkerboard, the stripes have a yin and yang relationship. They are opposing yet conjoined, working in cycles with one another, like the sun and moon, when combined these forces create the totality of our universe'.

The diptych captures a suspended moment of choice, evoking the complex interplay between curiosity, harmony, and change. On the right panel, Eve holds an untouched apple—a symbol of potential knowledge, transformation, and destruction.

'Eve has a curiosity about the message from the snake, the apple simultaneously holds the power for expansion and destruction. The collision of the two will create the chaos that we are familiar with in our current state of being. Will Eve lose Gods favor? Will this loss result in her ultimate salvation through choice?'

– Tschabalala Self

In dialogue with Self's reimagining of Eden are the newly commissioned works *Snake* 2025 and *Bold Reclining Nude* 2025 that meditate on fear, transformation, and embodiment. *Snake* traces the artist's journey of confronting and releasing long-held emotional states. Part biblical allegory and part personal mythology, the snake first appeared to Self as a vision—non-threatening but insistent. Painting it became a way of releasing it from her mind—an act of spiritual and personal liberation. 'I realised it was not malevolent. Maybe it was just something that needed to be reckoned with in order for something else to come about', she reflects.

Paired with *Snake*, *Bold Reclining Nude* celebrates the feminine form and Self's lived experience. Using lino cuts and silicone stamps, the work fuses figuration and abstraction to reflect growth, complexity, and the layered nature of embodiment. Speaking to the work Self explains, 'I see this figure as existing in a liminal space... but her space is the most physical space of any of my works'.



Tschabalala Self, *Bold Reclining Nude* 2025. Courtesy the artist, Pilar Corrias, London, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / Vienna and Petzel Gallery, New York.

Tschabalala Self, *Snake* 2025. Courtesy the artist, Pilar Corrias, London, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / Vienna and Petzel Gallery, New York.

In Gallery Two, the suite of new and older works are distinctively less anchored by cues recognisable from the everyday world. This liminal zone focuses our attention more acutely on a psychic register. Ambiguity of presence is a recurring motif in Tschabalala Self's practice, generating psychological tension and opening her portraits to a non-corporeal world. Through overlapping metaphors and layered references, she creates a space suspended between reality and fantasy, where projection shaped by desire and observation reveals more about ourselves than about the figures depicted.

Challenging conventional assumptions, *Submission* 2025 and *Self Humility* 2025 reframe ideas of surrender as acts of personal empowerment. These works explore the radical potential of acceptance and rest, suggesting that true strength lies in understanding one's emotional landscape.

‘Submission is not only about control; submission can be an act of love or acceptance... it is also simply about surrendering to the way of the world’.

– Tschabalala Self

In a world where marginalised bodies have long been compelled to resist, Tschabalala Self offers an alternative narrative of liberation. ‘The Black body, especially the Black woman's body in the American context, has been burdened with constant expectation of activation’, she explains. These paintings challenge the expectation of constant struggle, proposing instead a form of radical self-care.

Submission here is seen not as capitulation, but as a complex emotional strategy. Self reflects on this notion, ‘Sometimes you can spend your whole life trying to convince people of your humanity, or you could just stop and live your life’. Crucially, these works are about choice—what she calls ‘submission by personal choice’—a deliberate act of letting go, of finding peace in acceptance. They propose surrender not as weakness, but as a profound act of self-knowledge, healing, and acceptance. For the artist, taking a seat is an act of power, ‘It's about reclaiming a seat at the table, but also about just taking a break’.



Tschabalala Self, *Seated* 2019. Courtesy the artist, Pilar Corrias, London, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / Vienna and Petzel Gallery, New York Private Collection, Shanghai.

In this historical context, where Black bodies have often been valued for their labour, *Seated* 2019 represents an act of self-determination. The earliest work presented in *Skin Tight*, it explores rest not just as a physical state but as a form of personal and collective liberation. By taking a seat, Self reclaims agency, challenging narratives of constant productivity and resistance, and asserting the fundamental right to pause, reflect, and restore.

In the adjoining gallery, the coupling of *The Voyeur* 2021 and *Dreamers (diptych)* 2021 contrasts a focus on watching and exteriority, with a moment of heightened interiority and intimacy. *The Voyeur* presents a male figure seated in a domestic space marked by tiled floors and wallpaper. He appears excitable and uneasy, while a woman lingers at his side, her presence indistinct—perhaps phantom, memory, or fantasy. The viewer is left without answers. The palette of purple—a mix of blue and red—evokes the ‘in-between’ states of emotion, identity, and the experiences that shape our humanity. Rather than offering singular feelings or fixed interpretations, Self embraces complexity, layering references and resisting the need for resolution.

Hung opposite is Self’s diptych, *Dreamers (diptych)*, which considers intimate connection beyond physical reality. The work depicts two figures separated by the boundaries of their respective picture planes yet connecting in a different realm. The artist describes it as, ‘two lovers meeting in a dream state... both eyes are closed’. This work suggests that profound emotional bonds can exist in liminal spaces beyond immediate perception, representing the intimacy of shared unconscious experiences.



Tschabalala Self, *Dreamers* (diptych) 2021. Courtesy the artist, Pilar Corrias, London, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / Vienna and Petzel Gallery, New York

The final room in *Skin Tight* presents *The Bigger Picture* 2021, a three-panel installation based on a live performance called *Sounding Board*. The luminous and energetic play was originally for Performa 2021 Biennial. The work blurs the lines between reality, fantasy, and performance. A male and female actor perform scenes of dialogue using humour and exaggerated sincerity in conversations that move from honesty to absurdity, earnest introspection to joyous melodrama. These two protagonists—an artist and their partner—are portrayed by two performers, creating a doubled representation of both roles. A Boney M cover band performs some of the iconic disco group’s greatest hits to accentuate the emotional register of the drama, akin to a Greek chorus. Their lively tunes permeate the gallery space.

‘*Sounding Board* 2021 was created for the Performa 2021 commission. Roselee Goldberg encouraged me to participate in the Biennial despite my disinterest in performance art at that time. She believed in the narrative potential of my painting works transcending the wall in a time-based medium. *Sounding Board* is an exploration into human relationships, performativity, and the multiplicity of the self’.

– Tschabalala Self

Staged in Jackie Robinson Park in Central Harlem, Self designed the costumes, stylings, and backdrop, which is evident in that every element is infused with her distinctive use of patterning and colourful geometry. Beyond linear narrative, *Sounding Board* takes a philosophical approach where life, performance, and artistic practice are brought into the fold through ebb and flow. In translating her work into a moving, time-based medium, Self questions how storytelling can move across forms and expand beyond traditional boundaries.



Tschabalala Self, *The Bigger Picture* 2024. Courtesy the artist, Pilar Corrias, London, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / Vienna and Petzel Gallery, New York

In her site-specific mural, Tschabalala Self reimagines the biblical characters Adam and Eve not as figures of sin, but as metaphors for opposing yet complementary forces. The artist considers, ‘The apple is an opportunity to unite’, and goes on to propose, ‘the duality will create chaos, but that collision gives a clearer understanding of the universe’. Painted directly onto the wall with support from students at the Victorian College of the Arts, these ephemeral murals invite reflection upon the power of embracing curiosity, knowledge, and difference.

Skin Tight invites Australian audiences to engage with the literal and conceptual layers of Tschabalala Self’s internationally celebrated practice. The exhibition presents work that challenges the status quo of dominant narratives, while remaining rooted in the personal. Self’s nuanced handling of the personal, the collective and the corporal in this body of work culminates as a space where audiences may meditate on the spectrum of life—from the mundane to the profound. In a world that often seeks to simplify and categorise, leaving so many increasingly divided, Self’s fearless exploration of identity and creativity embodies a spirit of resilience, pushing beyond the constraints of persecution to reveal the depths of human potential.