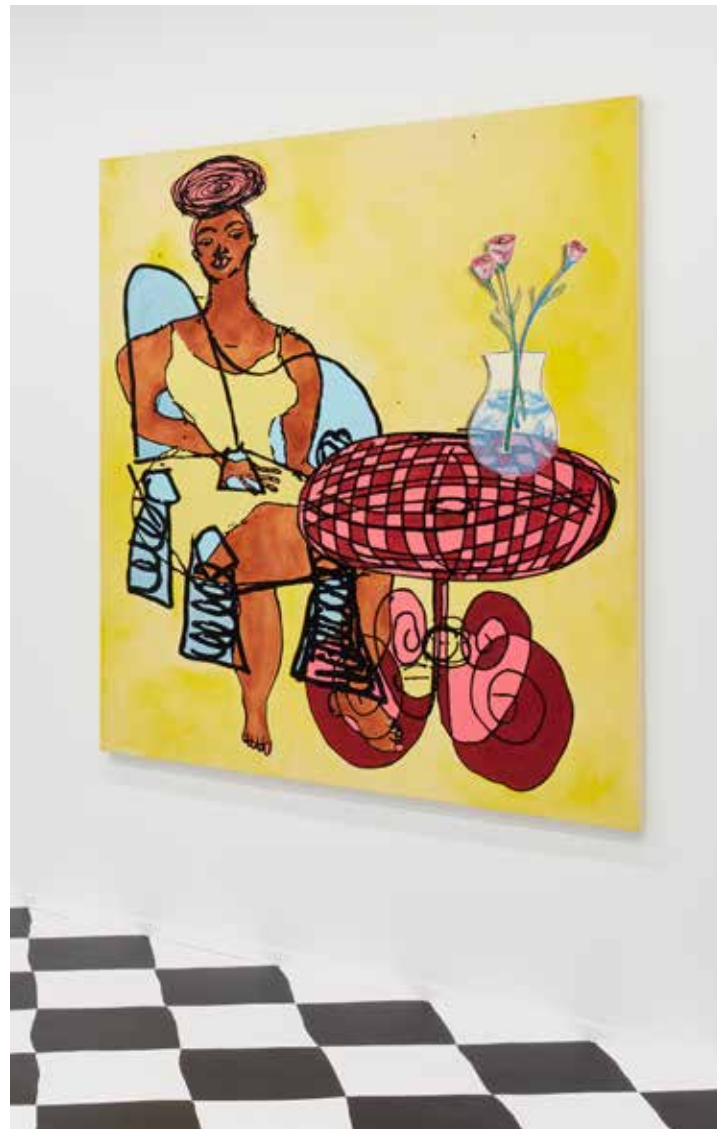


# TSCHABALALA SELF IN CC STROMBEEK

Review  
by Sorana Munsya

## BITTERSWEET PAGEANTRY



Installation view TSCHABALALA SELF, 'Feed Me, Kiss Me, Need Me', Cc Strombeek, Grimbergen, courtesy the artist, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / Vienna and Pilar Corrias, London, photo We Document Art

La, la, la, la, la, la  
La, la, la, la, la, la  
My Cherie amour, lovely as a summer day  
My Cherie amour, distant as the Milky Way  
My Cherie amour, pretty little one that I adore  
You're the only girl my heart beats for  
How I wish that you were mine

The romantic and somewhat naïve 'la, la, la' of Stevie Wonder's 'My Cherie Amour' (1969), covered by the German-Caribbean discopop group Boney M (1985), is one of the connections between the various works in 'Feed Me, Kiss Me, Need Me', the solo exhibition by the African American artist Tschabalala Self, curated by Charlotte Crevits. The sound of the video coming from the central space of the CC Strombeek exhibition room helps us to read the three large paintings at the entrance and the sculpture at the end.

By uniting the artist's recent aesthetic developments, the video *Sounding Board*, featuring a series of disco covers, plays a crucial role in the exhibition. The vivid colours, patterns and

curvilinear forms found in Self's pictorial work provide the foundation for the staging of *Sounding Board*, which also includes a piece of theatrical scenery that serves as a seating area for visitors to the exhibition.

*Sounding Board* is a performance by Tschabalala Self that premiered at the 2021 Performa Biennial in New York, held at the Jackie Robinson Park Bandshell in Harlem. For the exhibition at CC Strombeek, the artist converted the recording of the performance into a video, which is presented as a triptych on three large screens. The piece delves further into the recurring themes of the artist's oeuvre: gender and its associated roles, power dynamics, race, and their influence on both the spaces we inhabit and the intimate relationships we experience. Consequently, the viewer witnesses what appears to be a heated argument between a Black man and a Black woman, each played by two different actors. A single script is repeated for just over 53 minutes, creating a cacophony of dialogue, colours, shapes — and disco music. The interesting thing is that the performance also evokes the artist's relationship with her audience.



Installation view TSCHABALALA SELF, 'Feed Me, Kiss Me, Need Me', Cc Strombeek, Grimbergen, courtesy the artist, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / Vienna and Pilar Corrias, London, photo We Document Art

<Woman 1>  
 Kiss me. Feed me. Need me.  
 Not today. Today is about me. I mean,  
 can't you see that?  
 Can't you see all these eyes on me?  
 See it, feel it and know it, baby.  
 So like I said, don't crowd me. Give me  
 my space?  
 I want you here, just not in my spot.

<Man 1>  
 I'm not your baby. If anything, you're mine.

<Woman 1>  
 (scoffs)

<Man 1>  
 Like I said before, I don't care about your  
 audience. You don't belong to them.<sup>1</sup>

The tension between the private and public spheres is a defining feature in the creative process of numerous artists, as well as in their interactions with their audience. Tschabalala Self, by relating this tension between 'viewed' and 'viewer' to the domestic environment, allows us to reflect on Black intimacy, both within an African American context and beyond. The artwork highlights the notion of private space in relation to public space and the outside gaze.

*Sounding Board*, as Self explains, animates the figures depicted in her paintings. 'Feed Me, Kiss Me, Need Me' showcases three works from the Leisure Paintings series. This triptych notably portrays a Black male and female figure on separate canvases, with the third canvas depicting the couple together. The figures, created with broad and generous strokes of colour, blend into surroundings made up of furniture with similarly curved lines.

The backgrounds of each of the three paintings, monochromatic and devoid of any movement, seem to leave space for the cacophony of the intermingling lines and colours of the bodies. The bodies within the paintings bear both character and context. The bodies carry the context, the bodies inform the environment, the bodies are the context. Black bodies are the context, and, in Tschabalala Self's work, they seem to carry the burden of societal constructs such as race, gender and sexuality.

In an interview with German art historian and critic Isabelle Graw, the artist explains: 'With my figures, I feel to a large degree that they absorb ... The idea of me playing with the stereotype or the cliché is more about the figures absorbing the cultural power that is embedded within those ideas. But once they have access to that power, they turn the narrative towards their own end.'

For the artist, merging bodies that have been subjected to stereotypes with the stereotypes in question allows access to a particular type of power.

In doing this, the interior becomes the exterior and the exterior merges with the interior: the man's feet blend with the chair's, and the woman's upper body melds with the back of the armchair, resulting in two figures that are now moveable furniture-bodies.

A certain optimism seems to emerge from Tschabalala Self's work, as presented at CC Strombeek. Not only because of its shimmering colours, generous shapes and compelling sounds but also because of the realisation that domestic space provides an opportunity to take control of oneself and one's surroundings. It's as if extending domestic space outwards, as far as possible, extends the territory of the safe space that is the home.

However, just as the exterior and interior come together, Self's work flits between optimism and pessimism. In fact, the Black radical tradition accommodates both optimistic and pessimistic perspectives. Philosopher Norman Ajari, in his article titled 'Chair en miettes. Pessimisme, optimisme et tradition radicale noire', explains that the idea of Afro-pessimism results from the observation that white self-affirmation rests on anti-Black violence. The result casts doubt on Western society's ability to overcome its anti-Blackness. Anti-Blackness, which has its roots in the enslavement of Black people, stems from the concept of the Black body as movable property: as a commodity that can be used and manipulated ad infinitum, and which therefore has no right to its own agency. Ajari refers to the Black feminist thinker Hortense Spillers and her concept of the 'flesh' as opposed to the body. Since the body has the potential for individuality, Spillers prefers to use the concept of flesh to describe the position of Black people, which expresses more forcefully stage zero of social conceptualisation (Ajari, 2022) and the idea of Black people comprising a mass — without form and structure. This mass does not, therefore, distinguish women, men or children, but is merely the movable property that is grouped together in the environment in which they live.

So, despite the shimmering pageantry in Self's work, there is an underlying harshness of Afro-pessimistic thought, contributing to the environmental noise that it creates.

In his paper, Norman Ajari again quotes Hortense Spillers, referring to her famous text 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe'. In the text, Spillers explains how the Black American family is based on the separation of Black individuals and organisations, in an environment marked by exploitation and anti-Black violence. In this way, anti-Black violence infiltrates Black families and households, in which the defensive and offensive reflexes and associated traumas — developed outside the home — are installed.

Looking at Self's work is a bittersweet experience. On one hand, there's a bitter understanding of the insurmountable difficulty of evading the violence that is imposed upon Black people living in Western society. However, there is also a sense of hopefulness — the knowledge that reducing individuals to nothing more than their physical form presents an opportunity to establish a fresh humanity: one that is unencumbered by gender barriers and the ongoing violence present in our contemporary society.

Tschabalala Self, 'Feed Me, Kiss Me, Need Me',  
 through 4 February 2024, CC Strombeek, Grimbergen,  
 www.ccstrombeek.be



Installation view Tschabalala Self, 'Feed Me, Kiss Me, Need Me', CC Strombeek, Grimbergen, courtesy the artist, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / Vienna and Pilar Corrias, London, photo We Document Art

1. From *Sounding Board* (2021), as cited from Tschabalala Self, *Make Room* (Dijon: les presses du réel, 2023).