

this is art



Title : Tschabalala Self, Tramway 2017

Website : <http://www.tramway.org>

Tschabalala Self

Tramway

3 June - 20 August

Review by Alex Hetherington

American artist Tschabalala Self whose work is concerned with the iconographic significance of the black female body in contemporary culture, its fantasies and misrepresentations and their concurrent emotional, physical and psychological impacts, presents her first solo show in Scotland in a collaboration between Tramway and the Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art. Self's work disorients cultural and political standards of black female representation, restaging it through a multiple media discourse on the possibilities of race, gender, sexuality, modes of distribution and acts of appearance.

It is also worth noting that themes of black cultural representation and black spaces are explored in the group show 'The Other/d Artist/s' curated by Travis Alabanza on view at the nearby Transmission Gallery, featuring artists like Zinzi Minott, The Black House, Malik Nashad Sharpe, Symoné, Dominique White, Christian Noelle, Xana, Joy Miessi and Nina Mdwaba.

Across the twenty-one images presented in the installation Self constructs an effervescent world of figurative deconstruction that stages a re-imagining of the black female body. This is expressed through euphoric forms, through exaggerated bulges, through extended limbs and impossible gestures. These images dance through swellings of soft fabrics, through circuitous and flowing hand-stitching, embroidery and appliqué. Her images host exuberant movement and ecstatic craft. These dispersed figures extend beyond the image field, protrude outside of the canvas and its frame. They appear in folds, layers, overlaps and are majestic in scale. Different coloured threads stitch her figures together into fields of bright orange, lilac and powder blue. Breasts and arms are drawn out in glitter, leopard print, sequins and velvet. Occasionally chalk marks pick out details like eyes and painted nails. Some of the figures are rendered as freestanding mirrored glass, wood and painted brown paper silhouettes. Beautifully detailed drawings of hair and delicately painted chains appear beside eye motifs, fishnets, Calvin Klein denims and sunflower patterns. Self's figures are resolutely seductive, are at times full of youthful energy or gifted with absolute poise and dignity. In all of their positions and deportment her figures, or 'characters' as she describes them, make claim to existence and high visibility.

There also exists in these seductive surfaces a great deal of art history: the collage work of Wangechi Mutu comes readily to mind alongside affectionate pointers to the silhouette technique of Kara Walker and to the works of artist and activist Renée Cox, her performative photography of exaggerated female forms in particular, and the patterned abstractions of Murry Depillars. Making an appearance are a lattice of other artists engaged with figuration and portraiture like Henri Matisse, Chris Ofili, Andy Warhol and Willem de Kooning. In one jewelled painting there is a reconfiguration and recasting of 'Olympia' by Édouard Manet while in another Louise Bourgeois' spider as a motif for the maternal figure is enrolled into the image of a leaping female nude. Self's uses of everyday materials like discarded fabric brings to mind the work David Hammons and in the minute detailing of her ornate stitching to the painting 'Bird in Hand' by Ellen Gallagher. There is music and fashion here too, and enmeshed in these images are traces of Erykah Badu, Beyoncé, Diana Ross and Grace Jones, especially her iconic 'Island Life' album cover from 1985 designed by Jean-Paul Goude. Images from the 1970s of black model and actress Azizi Johari can be imagined throughout these portraits but also a suggestion, in their bumpy and juddering collages, bulging sculptural and abstract forms and thoughts on western notions of the female body and beauty, to the Japanese designer Rei Kawakubo and her avant-garde fashion house Comme des Garçons.

In the end the great, irresistible act of Self's work is its love story to the black female body; every part, potential, shape and fold of its form is caressed through stitch, paint and material miscellany. In turn, in experiencing these acts of diligence and care, through the affections and poetics these images transmit, the viewer is left seduced and caressed too.

Published on 21 June 2017