

Press release
November 2020

Tschabalala Self
Cotton Mouth

November 7, 2020, to January 23, 2021
All-day opening on Friday, November 6, 11 am to 8 pm
39 Great Jones Street, New York, NY 10012

Eva Presenhuber is delighted to present *Cotton Mouth*, an exhibition of new works by the American artist Tschabalala Self. *Cotton Mouth* is Self's debut solo exhibition with Eva Presenhuber and features paintings, drawings, sculpture, and an audio piece.

In process and presentation, Tschabalala Self's work explores the agency involved in myth creation and the psychological and emotional effects of projected fantasy. Self has sustained a practice wholly concerned with Black life and embodiment, with an intended audience from within that same community. In a flurry of stitches, Self assembles fully formed characters who, individually and situationally, hold power over their self-presentation and external perception. A power frequently denied to Black American people in their daily lives.

Each of the paintings in *Cotton Mouth* was painstakingly constructed by the artist. Formally, they could be read as multimedia collages, considering the marriage of paint and thread, though they lack that central ingredient in collage work—adhesive. The method of construction consistent throughout Self's practice—stitching—carries an autobiographical and emotional significance. Self's primary muse aside from herself—her mother—memorably used her hands to clothe and create for Self and her family. The labor in each stitch holds memory, affection, and protection.

Personal sentiment unfolds into something larger with the consideration of material and formal content in the work. "Cotton Mouth" indicates a cultural and historical significance specifically referential to elements within the Black American lexicon. "Cotton has a supercharged history for Black Americans specifically," says Self. "[It speaks to] Black Americans' labor and sacrifice—and tangentially embodies the Black American experience of American chattel slavery." As a material, cotton has a ubiquitous presence in everyday life, proving essential to almost every person on earth, but is infrequently acknowledged as the fruit of exclusively Black slave labor, accounting for over half of all American exports during the first half of the 19th century.

The body of work Self presents in *Cotton Mouth* is intended to speak to the unique phenomenon of Black American life through references to contemporary culture and Black America's past. Self purports, blackness, like all identities, is based on a personal mythology—mythology being that which is half fact and half fiction. In the contemporary sphere, Black pop culture can be understood as the primary embodiment of "modern-day folklore" to use the artist's own words. Within the title of the show, we also find reference to this practice of imparting knowledge, central to the African diasporic tradition. "I was thinking of the importance of oral history and diaspora as a way to carry lessons, information, or historical events to the next generation," explains Self.

Most of the work in the show is situated in simulated spaces mimicking the home. "Domestic space is one of indoctrination and is the primary environment in which one receives information," says Self. In the diptych *Spat*, a couple is engaged in a tenuous conversation, with the female figure on the left cross-legged and facing her partner. The male is on the "lashing end" of the argument, his vulnerable state made apparent by his visible rib cage. In *Sprewell*, Self pays tribute to the immediacy of honest emotion and intimate romance. The work references NBA star Latrell Sprewell in a #blacklove vignette—a Sprewell jersey worn by the male protagonist in the piece hearkens to the controversial choking of his coach in a pointed demand for agency and poignant expression of fury and resilience.

This bodily rage is respected, retaining its humanity and complexity throughout Self's entire body of work. Beasts play a constant and important role in Western mythology and "oftentimes that symbolism is conflated with blackness," suggests Self. The parallel agendas of dehumanization and racism are examined and rebuked through the nuanced animalistic references that appear in the show.

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Self's narratives are non-linear, proposing a variety of conclusions and introductions. Her paintings thrust words into spaces where speech has been denied. "People say they have cotton mouth when they smoke too much and their mouth ceases to function," says Self. The choice of title is a burdened one, as a mouth that can no longer function serves as a metaphor for the systemic and continued silencing of Black America. *Cotton Mouth* is a continuation of the lore, which has kept Black people alive, in communion with their history, and alert to the possibilities of their future.

"The work exists within a vacuum of blackness," states Self, who favors Black subjects, pulls inspiration from within her personal experience and the Black community she navigates daily (whether in New Haven or Harlem), and intends the work to be consumed and engaged with by Black people. Self's figures have been referred to before as "exaggerated," a term that reveals the white-centric perspective that previous critics have exhibited. In reality, her subjects are not fictive, nor do they have enlarged or highlighted features but, rather, are rooted in reality and frequently take cues from the body of the artist herself. Self's psychic energy is poured into the work, through her hand stitching (usually undertaken with the in-process work laid flat on the floor) and through the materials. For *Sprewell*, Self repurposed favorite jeans she could no longer fit, utilizing her body and its changes to create work packed with meaning both literally and figuratively. The other pieces within this show exhibit that same bodily integration in a sensitive and robust way.

Tschabalala Self was born in 1990 in Harlem, NY, US, and lives and works in New York, NY, US, and New Haven, CT, US. She graduated from Bard College in 2012 and received her M.F.A. from the Yale School of Art in 2015. Future and recent solo exhibitions include *By My Self*, Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, US (2021); *Cotton Mouth*, Eva Presenhuber, New York, US (2020); *Tschabalala Self: Out of Body*, ICA Boston, Boston, US (2020); *Thigh High*, Pilar Corrias, London, UK (2019); *Tschabalala Self*, Art Omi, New York, US (2019); *Hammer Projects: Tschabalala Self*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, US (2019); *Tschabalala Self*, Frye Art Museum, Seattle, US (2019); *Bodega Run*, Yuz Museum, Shanghai, CN (2018); *Bodega Run*, Pilar Corrias Gallery, London, UK (2017); *Tschabalala Self*, Tramway, Glasgow, UK (2017); *Tschabalala Self*, Parasol Unit Foundation for Contemporary Art, London, UK (2017).

Self has participated in numerous group exhibitions such as *Beyond the Black Atlantic*, Hannover Kunstverein, Hannover, DE (2020); *Radical Figures*, Whitechapel, London, UK (2020); *Desire: A Revision from the 20th Century to the Digital Age*, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, IE (2019); *Unparalleled Journey through Contemporary Art of Past 50 years*, Rubell Museum, Miami, US (2019); *Present Tense: Recent Gifts of Contemporary Art*, Philadelphia Art Museum, Philadelphia, US (2019); *Prospect*, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, San Diego, US (2019); *MOOD: Studio Museum Artists in Residence*, MoMA PS1, New York, US (2019); *Paint also known as Blood*, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, PL (2019); *Show Me as I Want to Be Seen*, Jewish Museum, San Francisco, US (2019); *Dirty Protest: Selections from the Hammer Contemporary Collection*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, US (2019); *Triple*, University Art Museum, Albany State University, Albany, US (2018); *The Beyond: Georgia O'Keeffe and Contemporary Art*, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Raleigh, US (2018); *Mademoiselle*, Centre Régional d'Art Contemporain Occitanie/Pyrénées-Méditerranée, Sète, FR (2018); *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon*, New Museum, New York, US (2017).

Camille Okhio

For further information, please contact Jill McLennon (j.mclennon@presenhuber.com) at the gallery.

For press images and information, please contact Naomi Chassé (n.chasse@presenhuber.com) at the gallery.