



FRESH PAINT: TSCHABALALA SELF

FEBRUARY 5–JUNE 1, 2026



PARRISH ART MUSEUM

The FLAG Art Foundation

ORIGINS

by Camille Okhio

Ancient symbols encapsulate as much as their many years of existence suggest. The interpersonal complexities between one man and one woman can serve as a stage on which the bulk of society's troubles and joys play out. Othello and Desdemona's love provides fertile ground for anxiety, internalized racism, and ego-fueled paranoia to fester. Antony and Cleopatra's dynamic depicts the increasing desperation of despots on the decline and how they cling to all that is familiar: mirrors to their megalomania.

And then there are our first woman and our first man, whom science may place somewhere northwest of the Sahara and our myths place somewhere just out of reach. Everyone's reach. Fear, desire, detachment or the lack of it, naivete, knowledge, love, and *choice* mingle and simmer in the liminal space between Adam and Eve.

The paradise of Tschabalala Self's construction distills a complex inner reality within a straightforward frame. Two parts of one diptych, Adam and Eve exist together and apart, as they did in their tale. He is of the earth, she is of him, and yet she surpasses him. Their dynamic illustrates the human drive toward self-realization. Who are we? Why are we here? What is there to know? Is it advisable that we know it? Our despair in the absence of understanding is made clear in their tale, as the idea of paradise—a place of peace and perfection, a place no one would want to leave—is created and uncreated.

It begins with one consciousness. It sees and thinks and eats and sleeps, and it finds no meaning in all it does. It needs another. Eve comes into being as a companion, proof of humans' sociable nature. She is ancillary to Adam's centrality, but he needs her presence in order to judge, quantify, and enjoy the bounty of Eden. When Eve steps forward into their shared narrative, she becomes central. Then she fills the frame, becoming all we can see. No one talks about Adam, his qualities, or what flaws might decorate his character. We instead pathologize and analyze Eve—what might she have been thinking, what might she have been convinced of. She is unquestionably the more complex of the two.

Eve is so frequently painted as the easy target: Satan's low-hanging prey. But if it was easy to convince Eve of her ignorance, it was easier to convince Adam of his. He shared of the apple willingly, eagerly perhaps. He trusted his partner. She trusted herself. In Self's twin compositions Eve is a conduit. She is the path through which the apple reaches the

rest of us. As Adam looks back, she looks forward. His Frankensteined arm extends behind him, a dancer's Balanchine hand beckoning Eve to join him and share. His appendage is pieced together from more than ten scraps of different origins. Adam is an amalgam here, a figure of diverse impulses and modes, as yet unresolved. Eve is more cohesive, perhaps signaling a further point along the path of self-realization in relation to her male partner. Hung together, Adam seems to wish for Eve's company as he looks back at her; the choice to acquiesce lies with her.

We use our eyes to see, to gather information, to provide us with the information we need to make judgments. Our arms are our antennae—they are proof of our species' need for society. Without our arms we cannot embrace, caress, or aggress. Eve's arm, sewn from one piece of chocolate cloth, is not texturally disjointed as Adam's is. In this version of Eden, Adam is fractured, susceptible. Eve is decisive. Her desire for agency is palpable; she needs to choose.

Adam and Eve are composites in Self's Eden, comprising parts from other lives, other paintings. All of Self's work is connected through material and origin. One pair of trousers, disassembled and reconfigured, could make up an inch or a foot in two paintings, or four, or ten. Self's practice is an ouroboros; the textiles that serve as tools in her life and the ones that find her as she moves through that life connect her works as one. Her medium is its own self-sustaining language. Her practice is a micro-reflection of the circle of life, with natural death feeding rebirth.





Using fabric as seeds, Self sows the questions, investigations, and rare conclusions that populate her conscious and self-conscious mind, offering to her audience archetypes, dichotomies, and symbols to reconsider. Knowledge and choice are central to Self's Eden narrative. She asks what knowledge does. Here it frees, but it can also burden. Self posits that choice is the prelude to knowledge. The right amount of learning can propel one forward, too much of it can render one permanently immobile.

Many intellects operate under the conviction that there is no such thing as too much information one person can have. With the onset of



artificial intelligence and its forced integration into corporate and digital social life, Self suggests that we are rapidly reaching the point at which human minds will crash. "People are realizing these superpower thinking machines can cause an unprecedented amount of social upheaval," Self says.

In diasporic Christian communities there is a saying: "God doesn't give you anything you cannot handle." That can be interpreted to mean that any information gathered through intrahuman interaction (reading, talking, eating, traveling, all forms of experiencing) cannot on its own overwhelm the human psyche. But once one begins to rely on the

unhuman to gather and collate human information, where do those boundaries go? Organic exposure deepens. The machine confuses.

Self's work does not unilaterally suggest that technological advancement is inhumane, but rather questions what the artificial does to the organic. Is it not logical that an intelligence born independent of organic matter might prove incompatible with organic life? Eve's questioning spirit drove humanity toward free will: our blessing framed as a curse. If evil was once expressed through the very existence of a greater knowledge, could it be that evil has transformed as the world has widened, and taken on a form that flattens knowledge with invention? And how did we arrive here? "I think this is the final destination for very Western and Eurocentric understandings of humanity," muses Self. "The understanding that your body is fully secular and a machine." Or that it should be a machine.

Within the context of Eden, Self is also able to explore the body, sin, and most poignantly freedom. Eve's choice has been written as a downfall. Interestingly, the direct aftermath of her awakening is demarcated by carnal desire. The body, once part of paradise, now becomes a mortifying remembrance of what has been lost. The moment when Adam and Eve become aware of their bodies could also be read as a revelation. Their newfound knowledge could be a door to further splendor or the birth of an eon of woes. Which one depends on the reader's answer to Self's questions: How much knowledge is too much knowledge? What is freedom? Is freedom bliss? Can there be freedom without choice? Can there be paradise without choice? Can paradise be chosen, or must it be given?

Though Self relegates paradise to the background in a compositional context, she also uses it as a character. Paradise is a point of reference, something to walk into or away from. It represents comfort without clarity: a golden cage. Paradise is the world without human intervention. Once we have left, can we ever return to it? Or would our very involvement in its construction render it something else?

What must it have been like to wake up in Eden, the smell of honeysuckle and lavender wafting around you, the quiet rustle of friendly woodland creatures providing company without a threat? The sky would open fully above you, crystal clear, endless, bright, and beckoning. The wind would cool and not pummel you, the dew would sparkle on any foliage nearby, the berries and fruits would heave, weighing down the branches that support them. And the apple sits in this garden's center, a symbol rather than a source of nourishment. The apple acts as the boundary of paradise, suggesting that perfection requires protection.



In Self's paradise it is not the apple that is loaded, but Eve's choice. Her choice to pluck and bite the fruit has more weight than the fruit itself. In *Adam and Eve*, Self uses the earliest interpersonal relationship in the Judeo-Christian world to explore the symbols, dynamics, and imbalances that decorate and dismantle the modern psyche. Choice is at the center of her quandary, to which she does not attempt to provide an answer. She asks if paradise can be chosen. Contemplating her work inevitably leads to questions of what paradise is to the viewer, and since this exercise requires description, we must invent paradise as we contemplate it. Eventually one comes to the realization that at least for us, human beings living in a globalized twenty-first-century world, paradise exists only in response to something else. It cannot exist without context, it cannot exist without an un-paradise, something worse, something that does not comfort us. This un-paradise looms as a threat, keeping paradise within its boundaries. But if this looming threat disappears, does paradise also?

The answers are supposed to fluctuate. Self's composition reveals paradise as a prism, ever shifting. It suggests that paradise cannot exist in perpetuity, untouched, but must be made and unmade, examined and perfected, destroyed and rebuilt, continuously, until we have learned every lesson and gathered every variable piece of information and truth that the universe is capable of producing. Some may call that near-endless wheel of discovery hell and some may call it heaven. Maybe they are the same. Maybe Adam and Eve are two poles within our psyches, constantly weighing the danger of choice and the emptiness of ignorance.

AUTHOR BIO

Camille Okhio is a New York-based writer, curator, and historian. Her work centers on fine and decorative arts and their narrative potential.

ABOUT FRESH PAINT

An ongoing partnership between the Parrish Art Museum and The FLAG Art Foundation in New York, *FRESH PAINT* is a rotating series of single-artwork exhibitions at the Parrish that spotlight new or never-before-exhibited works by both emerging and established artists. By circumventing traditional exhibition planning timelines—which can extend years into the future—*FRESH PAINT* provides a platform for artists to promptly showcase freshly created artworks and ideas, allowing for a more direct response to current issues and cultural movements. Each *FRESH PAINT* installation is accompanied by two sets of interpretative texts: one is a commissioned piece of writing by an invited author, critic, poet, or scholar; the other is a collaboration between members of the Parrish Teen Council ARTscope.

FRESH PAINT: Tschabalala Self is organized by Scout Hutchinson, The FLAG Art Foundation Associate Curator of Contemporary Art at the Parrish Art Museum, in collaboration with Jon Rider, FLAG's Director; Caroline Cassidy, FLAG's Deputy Director; and Madeline DeFilippis, FLAG's Exhibitions and Programs Manager.

EXHIBITION SUPPORT

FRESH PAINT: Tschabalala Self is made possible, in part, thanks to the generous support of The FLAG Art Foundation.

The Parrish Art Museum's programs are made possible, in part, by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature, and by the property taxpayers from the Southampton School District and the Tuckahoe Common School District.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Parrish Art Museum is located on 14 acres of ancestral Shinnecock land. We, at the Parrish, recognize Shinnecock people as the traditional stewards of this land.



PARRISH ART MUSEUM
279 MONTAUK HIGHWAY
WATER MILL, NY 11976

631.283.2118 | parrishart.org

Cover and interior images: Tschabalala Self (American, b. 1990). *Adam and Eve*, 2025, acrylic paint, fabric, thread, colored pencil, painted canvas on canvas, each: 102 x 96 in. © Tschabalala Self. Courtesy the artist, Pilar Corrias, London, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / Vienna and Petzel Gallery, New York. Installation view: Jenny Gorman.