

FUSE

A BOMB
PODCAST

VISUAL ARTIST AND MUSICIAN

Tschabalala Self & Abdu Ali

SEASON 2 | EPISODE #6

Tschabalala Self is a Harlem-born visual artist. Her work concerns the emotional, physical and psychological impact of the Black female body as icon. Her solo exhibitions include: By My Self, at Galerie Eva Presenhuber, and Cotton Mouth, on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Self's work is included in the collections of The Art Institute of Chicago, The Hammer Museum, and The Studio Museum in Harlem, among others.

Abdu Ali is a musician, writer, cultural worker, and artist. Blending punk, jazz, Baltimore club music, and rap. Their works explore ideas of race, gender, sexuality, and liberation. They received a 2018 Ruby Artist Grant and a 2019 Best Artist Award by the LGBTQ Commission of Baltimore City.

Chantal McStay Welcome to FUSE, a BOMB podcast. 40 years ago, BOMB began as a conversation between artists around a kitchen table in downtown New York. Today, FUSE brings you into the room to listen in on candid, unfiltered conversations about creative practice. Here's how it works: BOMB invites a distinguished artist to choose a guest from any creative discipline—an art crush, a close collaborator, or even a stranger they've admired from afar, and we bring them together. No host, no moderator, no interruptions, just two artists in conversation. For this episode, we asked visual artist Tschabalala Self who she'd most like to speak with. She selected her friend Abdu Ali, the musician and multidisciplinary artist. The pair discuss the fantasy of permanent institutional spaces, unapologetic art, and the fraught desire for canonical recognition.

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Tschabalala Self

When I was asked by BOMB to choose an artist who I would most like to speak to, Abdu was the obvious choice. We have collaborated on many projects before, and we've been in dialogue often. And it's just been such an easy conversation and also just super transformative.

CM Abdu Ali is a musician, writer, cultural worker and artist. Blending punk, jazz, Baltimore club music, and rap, their works explore ideas of race, gender, sexuality, and liberation. They received a 2018 Ruby Artist Grant and a 2019 Best Artist Award by The LGBTQ Commission of Baltimore City. Tschabalala Self is a Harlem-born visual artist whose work concerns the emotional, physical, and psychological impact of the Black female body as icon. Her solo exhibitions include *By My Self* on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art and *Cotton Mouth* at Galerie Eva Presenhuber. Self's work is included in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Hammer Museum, and the Studio Museum in Harlem, among others.

Abdu Ali So I guess we—before we met physically, we met via conversation and for me, I feel like that's just as meaningful as meeting someone in real life, meeting people through dialogue. Because as a Gemini Moon and a Gemini Venus, like, dialogue and conversation really can affirm a lot for me as far as like how I feel about a person. And I think that interview that we had for ART PAPERS magazine, when we was talking, I was like, "Oh, yes, okay, we clickin'"; cuz, you

know, when you're interviewing people, you never know what the vibe will be. It might just be surface level, it might not be too intimate of a conversation, or it might just be...not too personable, but when we talked, it was just like we met before, you know what I'm saying? It was mad organic, natural. And I feel like we were interested in a lot of the same type of topics and theories. And, yeah.

TS Yeah, and I think we shared the same goals for the piece. Like we really wanted to have like a serious conversation about the same subject matter. And we both wanted to facilitate one another in like reaching that goal, and I agree, it was totally natural, even though we had never spoken on the phone. And there's a certain level of intimacy speaking on the phone, especially with someone you never met in person before. But it was completely easy.

AA It was completely easy. For that piece, yeah, I think it was called B O D Y P L A Y, and I wanted to just talk about literally, I guess, the Black body or the Black woman's body. And I definitely—when they asked me to write something, you definitely came to mind because I was definitely stalking you—not stalking you, but like, a huge fan.

TS Keeping up with each online.

AA Yeah, I was a huge, huge, huge fan, and I don't remember like the moment when I first saw your work online. I do remember how I felt when I first saw your work. First of all, this is out of this world. This is very like...I don't know. I don't, I don't want to, I don't think your work speaks to Afrofuturism, but it's definitely influenced by Afrofuturism, right. And we are the future.

TS Well, that's what you were saying yesterday, that we are in the future right now. So that makes sense that the work, if it's about this contemporary moment, would embody Afrofuturism to some degree, because we are the Afrofuturists. If this is not the future, or potentially the, like, dystopic moment that happens right after, then I don't know what else it could be right now.

AA Afrofuturism?

TS Yeah.

AA Yeah. When I first started doing music, I was heavily influenced by Blaqstarr, who is a DJ and producer from Baltimore who is a pioneer of Baltimore club music, and he worked closely with M.I.A. on a lot of her tracks and Diplo as well, but yeah. So, so his music is very just—I mean, for me, he really was able to find a way to push Baltimore club into the future, and, I don't know, just in the production in itself, just very ethereal and melodic and rhythmic, and he was able to turn Baltimore club music into song songs, because I think before then it was...it was mostly just feeling like music for the club. I feel like he made Baltimore—he transmuted Baltimore club music for like, for it to exist outside of the club arena. I was also heavily influenced by Patti Smith's first album, *Radio Ethiopia*, and a lot of 70s...well, a lot of artists who, you know, were really popping in the 70s, which I think, for me, is one of the most iconic eras of music. Because we talk about Afrofuturism, Sun Ra, Alice Coltrane, George Clinton and P-Funk and all just like this, you know, this movement of funk music. It was this movement of avant garde experimental jazz. And it was also at the same time, like, I feel like the 70s was also about like spiritual liberation—

TS Black liberation.

AA Black liberation, women's liberation, gay liberation, all of it. And also even in the fashion. I mean, I just think, yeah, they were so trying to be in the, in the future, and like thinking about, you know, what it means to take up space, culturally and creatively, like right now. They was probably thinking about what the world was gonna be like in 2020 or 2021. And so yeah, I was heavily influenced by a lot of that music when I first came out. And a bunch of other things, too. Octavia Butler, *The Parable of the Sower*. I was introduced to her in my senior year of college and that's when I started making music. So like in the beginning of my music practice, yeah, I was definitely already influenced by Blaqstarr Baltimore club music, because I'm from Baltimore. And that's the music that I grew up to. But then like, I was also reading Octavia Butler. And I was also for the first time really getting to Sun Ra and Patti Smith and George Clinton and P-Funk. So yeah, like I definitely am influenced by Afrofuturism.

[CLIP FROM “SIRENS” BY AL ROGERS JR., JOY POSTELL, ABDU ALI]

TS How much do you think the music scene here in Baltimore shapes the culture?

AA I think predominantly what people have known creatively that comes out of Baltimore is the music. And we have a long rich history of just music artists that are pioneers, really, in music coming out of here and doing amazing things. I mean, we can go all the way back to Billie Holiday, or we can talk about Edina Howard, who randomly lived in Baltimore at one point, or we can talk about Dru Hill, Cisco is from Baltimore, Mario, but then we have like the legendary Baltimore club DJs like Blaqstarr and Rod Lee and DJ Technics and DJ Bume who were not just like popping DJs in a DMV but they was popping everywhere. Miss Tony and K-Swift and then RaRa and then you have my era, you know, me and TT The Artist and even Serpent with Feet and JPEGMAFIA, like all these amazing artists who I feel like are really I guess like pushing, pushing the boundaries of sound, which to me makes sense. If you grow up here and you live here, Baltimore is a very unruly city. I mean, we just always exist in this gray area like we literally between the North and the South, you know, right in the middle and I feel like we are right in the middle of New York and DC. So you know, it's kind of like this underdog city, but this underdog city that has like a lot of flavor and in a way, like us kind of...not necessarily being ignored, but not—Yeah, I guess being ignored, and it culturally and creatively kind of maybe worked in our benefit, because we were able to maybe avoid like being watered down like DC or New York.

TS You can exist more in a gray area. You don't have to have so much allegiance to like one particular place or region.

AA Yeah, cuz I grew up like being heavily influenced by, you know, New York music, you know, Biggie, Lil' Kim, or just, like, I guess the Northeast, like DMX and people like that, Tupac, but also being influenced by Southern rappers too. You know, OutKast and Goodie Mob and people like that. So I feel like yeah, we just being in the middle kind of help us be able to like take different vibes from both the South

and the North.

[CLIP FROM “CELL THERAPY” BY GOODIE MOB]

AA You're from Harlem, right?

TS Yeah, I'm from Harlem.

AA Do you feel like—I mean, Harlem obviously has a rich culture, especially a rich history in Black art and literature, everything. Do you feel like that essence, like, that comes out of there is influencing your work?

TS I feel like every aspect of my personality and my practice is shaped by where I grew up and how I grew up. I feel like in Harlem, you can find every kind of person, you know what I mean? And you can find every kind of person that also looks like you and I. So that's like a unique phenomenon, like as Black people, all kind of people from like all over the world in Harlem. And that's the thing that was most exciting about it growing up. Also, too, I come from, like, a large family. So, my household was always full of people. I have four older siblings, so them and all their friends, like my parents and their friends. Like, it's a lot of different people I feel like I met when I was really, really young. And a lot of my siblings' friends, my parents' friends were artists or creatives, like writers, musicians, artists. So also having that kind of exposure. My parents enjoyed the arts, so it was something that was kind of cultivated or encouraged in me, if I wanted to like pursue it. I think from like a young age, I always had an interest in it. And then when I got older, I decided it was something that I wanted to focus on. It was kind of a good—it was a good place to be in to be an artist. Like outside New York, Harlem, the city, it made sense. It wasn't something that seemed like it was so impossible to do, because I could look back and say, “Okay, I knew this person, neighbor, friend, family friend that had done something similar.” So it seemed possible,

AA How important it is to have those influences around you at a young age, to help you be able to envision like the possibility of you being an artist, especially. I grew up with not maybe artists in my, in

my family too much or working artists, but definitely creative people. Like my uncle is a...he paints and does tattooing. I also was fortunate to grow up in schools that taught me about the legacy of Black art and literature. Like at an early age, I was reading Maya Angelou and James Baldwin and Toni Morrison. Like, I was reading James Baldwin, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, in seventh grade, you know. And also, I grew up knowing like the legacies that came up in my own community, like I went to Booker T. Washington, which is the same middle school that Thurgood Marshall went through. Thurgood Marshall was from Baltimore. Or I grew up, you know, knowing that the block that I was existing on, which is Pennsylvania Avenue, MLK was at one point, a very poppin' cultural hub for Black creativity in the 19— from the 1920s to the 1970s. And it was this infamous theater called the Royal Theatre that like the biggest artists in Black—Black artists during those times would come through there. And you had to come through there and, like, do your thing, or you wasn't going to get like the flowers that you wanted. And also, I grew up with Miss Tony, who was a Baltimore club legend as a celebrated cultural figure in Baltimore. And she had her own radio show, too, and she had songs that would be played all the time. And Miss Tony, it was a gender-non-conforming Black gay man. And I had this as a part of my childhood youth and at the time being young, obviously, I didn't really know what queerness or being gay was, but I think just having that person as a role model, you know, affirmed me once I was beginning my journey as a queer person, which is definitely a privilege, you know, and a blessing to have that type of representation.

[CLIP FROM “AN INTERLUDE WITH FANNIE” BY ABDU ALI]

AA I feel like your figures are often like existing in these just like white spaces, I guess. Not white as in like racial but just like color like white—

TS Color fields or liminal space.

AA Yeah, but at the same time, when I think of Harlem, I think of just busy, and like poppin', and like, you know, something's always happening and I feel like your figures do come off like they, like they're a part of that energy. And they're doing something. There's a lot of

movement, a lot of movement that the figures are doing in your work. I don't know, even though, like, I guess your work isn't like... your figures aren't in environmental spaces, it still feels very much so like they are in a space, though. Especially with like the movement, the lines, but also the clothes they wear and everything.

TS For me, it's about thinking about who the person is in terms of like their personality, maybe. So, I think when you live in a city, you get accustomed to like looking at people. You look at people by default because it's just like so many people around, but also, too, you look at people because you need to kind of, I guess, get your bearings during any situation. So you kind of looking at people to observe them, but maybe also to, like, get a sense of who they are or like what they are about, you know, and you want to be able to come to some kind of conclusion relatively quickly. It's just something that you take on, I think, just from like city life. So growing up in New York and and growing up in Harlem, I think I've always been accustomed to just observing people and I find people very interesting. Like I'm think I'm a huge like voyeur. Like I love looking at people—how they walk, how they carry themselves, what they're wearing. And for me to make the portraits and kind of extract a person out of this context, this physical or social or political context, and to place them within a liminal space, I'm almost able to like really zone in on the individual or the subject in the painting. And in doing that, I feel like I'm able to make a painting more about them as a spiritual being, an existential being, maybe some aspect of their interiority, their mind, their desire, their emotions, as opposed to all this other information, which I feel like is relevant, maybe not as interesting. That's one of the points of like having the figures be in these kind of environments that are devoid of like all these markers, but then I do have other projects where the figure is very much situated within a space. Like, for example, the bodega run series. And then that space is very much married to the neighborhood that I grew up in, because a bodega is something that is...something that's like almost—it's part of New York. And not every part of New York. It's part of this very specific kind of neighborhood in New York. In that series, I wanted to find a space I felt was as iconic as my figures, almost. Like a space that existed as, like, a microcosm of all dynamics in the neighborhood at large. So the space itself is symbolic, and that's why I felt like it made sense to place my figures

in there. And also, I had been doing the paintings for so long with the figures in the liminal space, and I wanted to just like formally and conceptually challenge myself, like within my practice and see okay, like, what would it be like? What would the effect be if the figures were in an environment, and then that environment seemed like the most plausible environment that I would encounter one of my subjects if they were real. Cuz I feel like if I was to see one of my figures in the real life, in the real world, then I would see them at the bodega. So I figured, so that's kind of what site I wanted to focus on.

AA You was talking about information that isn't needed to be seen or that isn't interesting.

TS Not as interesting.

Abdu Ali 19:17

Well, like what, like can give an example?

TS Okay, I can place one of my figures in an environment, right? But in doing that, I would have to give some information to the viewer generally about, "Okay, is this an exterior space or interior space? What is the time period in which this is a space occurring? What are they wearing? Now that they're in reality, what kind of clothing are they wearing?" If they're not wearing clothing, they go from being nude to naked or naked to nude. It has all these different connotations. Whereas if I can just take all that away, or strip all that away, now I'm thinking about the body as being the site. So the body itself is a site of action as opposed to this locale that the body is within, and I feel like by naming the body as a site, you're pointing to the fact that the individual that is within that body, the natural experience with that body is merely a vessel for another experience, an existential, spiritual experience, potentially, a psychological, emotional experience, potentially. So by naming the body as a site, you're able to have much more interesting conversations about desire and the mind and spirituality. Whereas if you name the site itself, a location, and the bodies within it, now you're talking about the systems that control the site, the environment, and those systems are political and social. And those are systems which I don't fully believe in the validity of. So for me to make a work about it, I would have to somehow concede to

engage in a conversation about it.

AA Right, because, you know, I was gonna say that your work definitely does a good job at not centering the white gaze.

TS Yeah, I have no desire to do so. And it's not to edify me in any kind of way to do that. So, any kind of work-around I can find to avoid that, I try and one of the workarounds is to talk about the figure as itself alone, like not within the larger system of like society or nation or place or site.

AA So, when it comes to your sculptural figures, how do you tend to do that type of work in a gallery space? Because, you know, traditionally gallery spaces are like co-opted by whiteness and white people. So how do you go about like trying to not center the white gaze with your sculptural pieces in the gallery, or in a museum?

TS Yeah, I mean, it's something I'm still contending with. I can't say that—I can't sincerely say that I've fully like solved that issue. But, I do think about organizing the—and the sculptures play into this. I think about when I'm having a show, creating some kind of environment in which the figure...it appears to be, the environment appears to be owned by the figures, and trying to change the power dynamic so it doesn't appear as if the figures are there on display or there to perform for the audience. And so by having sculptures like inside the exhibition space—so having artworks that are not on the wall, but actually within the exhibition space, and having viewers need to like negotiate moving around them or having the viewer see that the works are now in the space itself, like taking up space, not just on the wall but in the actual space that they are meant to occupy, I feel like it's kind of pushing for the agency of the subjects.

AA Versus putting the figures on display or putting them like on a podium or like situate a stage.

TS Yeah, I want the viewer to feel as if they're entering into the space of the work, not that the work is there for them.

AA Like a zoo, or something.

TS And you know, a zoo is like a good thing to bring up, because I feel like a lot of times when people feel further marginalized within these institutional spaces, that's the feeling that they're pointing to, the feeling that they're on display, you know. That they're for some kind of pseudo-anthropological reason, like how a zoo functions.

AA Your figures are—like you say they kind of like spiritual entities, I guess, or energy entities, and with that being said, their shapes or like the outlines of their bodies isn't I guess scientifically like human bodies or whatever. But I feel like also it's kind of like a...like a secret code, a secret code like that only Black people would know how to crack, spiritually, and whether it be consciously or subconsciously. I started laughing in my head like as you were talking, because I was just like—obviously your work is genius, and there's no doubt in that. You're like a legend in the making, right? I just thought about like a white person buying your painting. I'm not saying white people can't be true fans of your work or my work, but sometimes I feel like this too when I perform, you know, especially when I was in Europe and I perform in mostly predominantly like white spaces or like with white audiences. Like even though they feelin' it, like I can also feel the energy they probably like "What is this?" because—which I love, because I don't care for you to figure it out, right? But you can adore the like the work and champion the work and love it and still, you know, support and etc., but at the same time, like I do want to leave a lot of pieces of it just for me and my people.

TS There's a surface level understanding that the masses attach themselves to. Then there's like a deeper like esoteric meaning that people who are either literally or figuratively initiated into the true meaning of the religion, like, understand, and everything is just like that. I mean, all systems, I think, it goes like that, even systems that are secular. So I definitely feel like that exists in my work. And I do wonder, too, like why people have like a compulsion to like buy or own art. Like, I wonder that, because that's not my position in this like system. I make the work. But I think if people want to own work or have work because they feel like by doing so they have ability to like own a part of history or culture or society or own the part of the world that is intangible that we all feel, but none of us can see or

touch. So they think that somehow through owning art, they are now in possession of that. Like, they've been able to turn that intangible feeling into something physical. So I think that artists have that desire, too, and that's why they make work. They produce art objects or music or performance, they're hoping to put in some kind of physical form our natural beings can interact with that part that is spiritual, potentially, you know? People who I think desire to collect them, those objects, or those bits and pieces, I mean, if they're wanting to, like hold on to it, possess it, I think they feel like there's power in it. And I believe there is.

AA There definitely is, and I think, you know, intention behind anything is something to examine. And I think that's why you're hearing now so many Black artists today talk about the importance of Black art buyers and Black people buying each other's work or Black people in general buying Black art, and also having your work acquired by Black institutions and Black galleries and Black museums, which is really rare in America. And yeah, but at the same time, I guess like—I don't know, me and my friend, a mutual friend of ours, we got into it. We got into it about like, would you allow a museum to buy your work? And I was like, "Fuck, no, I wouldn't. Fuck the museum, and this and that." And he was like, "Well, I want my work to be acquired by a museum, because I need my shit to, you know, have legacy. I need to last." and I feel like, you know—they wasn't agreeing with like museum practices and nothing like that, but they was just talking about the importance of, I guess, their work being preserved for like generations and generations.

TS Yeah, they're probably thinking about the practical elements of it, like it being preserved, it being documented, it being safe, it being on view to the public, because when private individuals have the work, who knows how many people will actually experience or, you know, whereas if an institution has it, you're thinking, you know, hundreds, thousands of people.

AA Right, but I'm also coming from the positionality of being a music artist and being a performer, where a lot of times I feel like the real like work that I do—which I feel like I'm a performer before I'm a recording artist.

TS Yeah, I can attest to that after seeing you perform live.

AA Thank you. And I feel like I was maybe more on the side of “fuck the museum acquiring my work,” because I’m like, as a performer, the work that I do is ephemeral. And I’m okay with that, and for me it’s an energy thing and it’s going to exist literally in the shakras or the vibrations of the receiver. And maybe, you know, that energy is going to be carried through generations if they have children, this and that. I be thinking on some like wild shit, you know, when it comes to that, so for me, I don’t care if like, necessarily my work, like if any of my music or my performances or whatever isn’t preserved for eternal and eternally. I’m okay with it dying.

TS It’s all a fantasy anyway to think that something will last forever. The institutions, you know, function off this collective agreement or belief that everything will go on as it has, which everyone knows that’s not possible, for one. At some point, all of it will be gone. I’m not saying we’re going to be around for that point or should even think about it. It could be very, very far—it could be a point far, far in the future. Yeah, I mean, none of it is going to be around forever, nothing lasts forever. You know, people are just trying to hold on for as much as they can get.

AA Okay, when I mean, like, physically last, I mean, less than forever, I’m thinking about physically, right. Because I feel like the work that we produce can last internally, but through frequency and through energy and consciousness.

TS I think that museums are a bit about posterity. But there also are about people feeling like there’s a certain level of, I guess, prestige or validation by getting the canon to recognize you. And I understand both sides of the argument. I understand how it could be subversive, right, to say, “Okay, now I’m here.” But I also understand the perspective when people say by even arguing to have a seat at the table, you are conceding that the table is of any relevance.

AA Unless you’re playing Robin Hood. And I think that’s what we need to be doing.

TS But how many people do that? Because that's why I love *Holy Mountain*, you have— remember the level right before the top? Where a lot of—that was like the bacchanal, like the party and the wine and the grapes, and a lot of people on their way to the top of the mountain, they get stuck right there. They think that that's the top, the party. And if you get stuck in that part, you're never going to make it to the top of the mountain and you damn sure never gonna walk back down. So a lot of people get caught up in the revelry of the acknowledgement and the accolades. So the idea that you're going to be the Robin Hood, you might be seduced by the whole system before you become Robin Hood. It might be too comfortable to think, Okay, now that I've, you know—I'm gonna not go back. That's what I think what happens, sometimes. That's why I think people are skeptical.

[CLIP FROM "KEEP MOVIN" BY ABDU ALI]

TS Some people truly just are not built for that. And you don't want to recruit people who don't want to participate. Because what they're going to do is just sabotage the whole movement out of resentment or just a lack of care, you know? If you feel like you want to participate in that kind of movement or discussion, and you feel like that's something that is important to you, then you should do it without fear or hesitation. But if you don't, don't feel coerced into participating, because if you do participate, it's not going to be wholehearted, and it's probably going to do more harm than good, in my opinion. But I do think that if you are a Black person, if you are like any kind of person that comes from a community or from like—who shares an identity politics that has generally been made to feel marginalized, that if you're able to find a way to escape, like a system that is generally meant to erase you or to harm you or to destroy you, if you're able not to be destroyed or harmed or made smaller, then you are in a way too still fighting, even if you're not centering the fight as a whole, like, within your practice or your daily life.

AA And if you're able to just make work unapologetically, that's unapologetic and autonomous in a way, that doesn't allow, you know, white influences, Western influences or Eurocentric influences. Yeah, I feel like then you're, resistance, like in the pursuit of resistance, as

well.

TS I agree, but also too, like, some of those things that we think are European or Eurocentric, they're also ours, as well, especially being here. Like, especially being American, Black American, like anything that has to do with this nation is ours, that we have full access to, we have full ownership to, we have full birthright to.

AA Right. So what are some things that you are interested in exploring and investigating these days?

TS I mean, there's so many. I think I want to kind of look at different ways of working, like different mediums. I'm also still interested in creating more new avenues to talk about Black life and to talk about the quotidian in a way that's exciting and fresh. I had a conversation recently, too, with another person. They were asking me like, do you think everyone's work is about their identity, or they were proposing that some people's work was about identity, but others wasn't, but I'm under the impression that everyone's work is about their own identity. I mean, that's logical, isn't it?

AA Yeah.

TS How could it not be?

AA How could it not be? And the whole gag is that I think white people need to start making work more about their identity.

TS It would be healing, I think!

AA Yes, and it's like, you know, because there's this conversation, like, you know, we're all like Black artists, like we only don't have to speak about Blackness and Black, you know, the Black experience and this and that. I think, for me, that sentiment is a little anti-Black, because I'm here about being all Blackity Black Black Black all the time, okay? You know, I was fortunate again to grew up learning the legacy behind Black art, literature, history, law, all of it, right, but a lot of people, a lot of Black folk in America didn't have that privilege, don't have that privilege. Because I heard this one artist before, a Black artist,

who was just like, “You know, I understand like there’s this movement for like young Black creators and artists to just indulge in just like, you know, the Black archives and Black history and Black literature and only consume Black content.” And he was trying to suggest that Black artists should also engage in white-made content, literature, art, etc., to have, I guess, a balanced view, and I was just like, excuse me, that’s all we’ve been growing up to all our lives, so as as young Black artists, if we want to just get into just everything Black, all Black, every day, then I feel like that’s plausible, because most of us grew up in academic institutions that do nothing but that. Because even though I did grow up with, consuming Black literature, art, etc., history, that was maybe still only 40, 30% of what I was learning in school, you know, because most of it was, you know, your Shakespeares and, you know, your Emily Dickinsons and stuff like that. So I just feel like yeah, it’s okay for us to just, you know, consume nothing but Black art, because so much of it has been ignored, erased, and just not taught. And I’ll never forget in this documentary with Sonia Sanchez, and she was talking about how when she first moved to New York, and she went to the Schomburg. And she went into the library, and she found all the, you know, all these archives of Black art, literature, movies, everything. And she said she started weeping.

[CLIP FROM “PEGGYLUDE II” BY ABDU ALI]

AA If you’re not talking about your own experience in your work, or, you know, your identity, then what the hell is you talking about? Or, if you’re not thinking about your—cuz you can be talking about physics and nature and this and that, but we are that too, you know?

TS I just don’t believe that anyone’s work is not about their lived experience. I just, I feel like that is complete falsehood that’s been perpetuated and needs to end.

AA Okay, I feel like white artists are maybe in that category. A lot of white artists are in that category—well, we’re not gonna talk about music. I’m just talking about visual art, I guess, where they’re work isn’t really...unless they’re like white and queer or white and lesbian and trans, like I feel like I tend to see them talking about their identity in their work. Okay, I’ll just say that. I think they do need to start

talking about whiteness more.

TS Well, I think if something's omitted, right, that is as important as what said, so if you, if your work appears to be devoid of any kind of social or political commentary, that also is a reflection of your lived experience. Your lived experience is devoid of any social or political commentary. So, that alone will point to any other person that has a different lived experience that that's possibly your background. You know, you can't just do the whole psychoanalysis thing on Black artists and their work. That has to be applied to everybody.

AA Exactly, exactly. And that's what it is.

TS Also, I feel like it'd just be far more productive for the arts community and for people in general if people just let go of this idea that, you know, identity politics don't effect everyone. It's burdensome even to the people who are made to feel as if they are human and everyone else is, like, X, Y, and Z kind of person.

AA I wanted to talk to you about collaboration, because this whole podcast is celebrating that and artists being fans of each other and I feel like honestly...I mean, I do think that we need to collaborate more. Not just me and you, but like the collective, and I feel like in a way it's ironic that we are more, I think, in conversation or we know about—a lot of us know about each other via Instagram or social media, but I feel like a lot of us aren't taking the effort to collaborate in real life. I feel like for the most part, you know, when you think about the Black arts community, let's just say in the East Coast, like, I feel like a lot of us are the homeys. We are friends, we in conversation, but I think something hasn't clicked where we're like, "Oh, we need to, like, make work together." Because when you think—I think about the Black Arts Movement, I think about...I don't know, even with Black writers like Sonia Sanchez, and Nikki Giovanni, Toni Morrison, they was all hanging out with each other, making work with each other, performing with each other, etc. Yeah, I feel like there's not only fun in collaboration, but also there's like something that can come out of that that's like, very enriching and like, you know, nuanced.

TS And what you were saying, too, about the void of Black institu-

tions. If Black collaboration could lead towards the building or the support of those kinds of institutions. So it's important for many reasons why people are in competition with one another, hold space with one another, and have trust and community with one another. Because that goes towards building infrastructure and towards organizing towards systems and spaces that can facilitate things for Black youth or be more equitable spaces for other Black creatives.

AA Yes, yes, yes. And I think that when you talk about organizing, I think maybe that's what I'm also speaking to is organized movement, I guess, within the Black arts space. And you're starting to see that like, you know, like, you have ARTS.BLACK, you have—well, my whole platform, as they lay, is about that, too. My last album, *Fiyah!!!*, was influenced by *Fire!!*, the zine from the Harlem Renaissance, with Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Richard Nugent, Aaron Douglas, you know, a legendary crew, and going back to collaboration, see what I'm saying? Like, I just feel like, it's so ironic in this technological age that we in we're not—I feel like they were back in the day collaborating way more than what we are doing now.

TS I mean, it is worth thinking about, and maybe the community as a whole should ask themselves, like, why isn't it happening? And if people agree that it could be something that's beneficial to everyone, like, how can we facilitate for it to happen? You know?

AA I think individualism is why it's not happening.

TS I mean, I agree. But individualism is what's causing a lot of issues as of late. Even think about the whole chaos of this whole past year, that has a lot to do with just this culture of individualism. Beyond individualism—or maybe it's tied into it, because like, you know, ego and maybe youth or things like that, maybe it's something that will happen more in the future, or maybe it's something that people will organically like fall into, you know.

AA Kwame Ture once said that individualism is a luxury you can no longer afford. And that's what I feel like we really got to put that into practice, that whole sentiment, but I was saying about the history of

Black publications, Fire!!, The Afro, the Black Panthers, they had their own publication, the Combahee River Collective, even Toni Morrison's book, *The Black Book*.

TS There's power in media, especially when it comes to images of Black people.

AA Okay, media is the fourth branch of government, okay.

TS True. So the fact that you're saying that there is no media outlet that's for Black artists, specifically, yeah that's, I mean, that's definitely a need. And you can see how that could—the lack of something like that could cause a void, a void in terms of like perspective and content. So I completely agree with you.

AA We need more publication, we need more collaborations, and we need more spaces for critique.

TS That is a whole other thing.

Abdu Ali 43:54

I mean, what is the other thing, honey?

TS I don't know. I mean, okay, we need more diversity, for one, within the Black critique system, because there's some level of tokenism that exists within that system right now.

AA And academic or intellectual elitism.

TS Yes. 100%. And sometimes I feel like just because someone's Black doesn't necessarily mean they understand your perspective. They might be extremely reactionary, or they might be, you know, just mimicking some kind of perspective they feel is the appropriate one in regards to like understanding your work that actually could be anti-Black or anti anything else that encompasses your identity. So there needs to be just more voices out there, so that when you're Black and they want to get a Black perspective, they don't keep going back to the same five people.

AA You know, when I think about Black critique or nourishing Black critique and helping Black artists elevate, I definitely think about the Studio Museum in Harlem. And I think that we need more not necessarily just Black museums, but like Black residencies.

TS There are more Black patrons of the arts, that people who have been either pushed out or ignore previously by, I guess, the brokers that manage all the moving and the selling of work, more Black people have entered into that system or those dynamics and they're buying more Black art. Black people are becoming more interested in having and holding and preserving Black art for future Black generations. And I feel like the Black institutions that have survived and who are here today standing strong, places like the Schomburg and the Studio Museum, I think that you're going to see other institutions that are going to feel motivated and inspired by those spaces, and, you know, at least try to start. Try to start to build something that can one day amount to that level of importance, you know, within the arts community. Yeah, something like the Schomburg, it kind of goes in and out of the arts community. It's not just art, it's everything. It's culture, within the cultural community as a whole.

AA Well, I think that Black creative sanctuaries is going to have to play multiple roles, you know, definitely, and can't just be like a space to exhibit art. It has to be as community center, a library, you know, maybe also a space for mutual aid, like all these things. And I think that's another thing to think about, and this is something that I want to, you know, do as someone who considers themselves a cultural worker, is to think about what it means for creative spaces or art spaces to be more community oriented. And how do we democratize those spaces so that everyone feels welcome and comfortable to come and exist in those spaces. I actually began my practice in Buddhism, recently, in one of my first Black—well, it wasn't specifically for Black Buddhists, but it was mostly Black Buddhists there, and one of my first classes or workshops, practicing mindfulness and Buddhism, you know, this idea of rest came up, you know, and Black people resting, this and that, how you really got to, you know, kind of reprogram your body to not always be in a reactionary state and mode. And like how mindfulness can help your body truly, I guess, be in a restful state or in a non-reactionary state, even in times of hard-

ship, or like, when you are approached by like, very violent situations. I definitely try to take pride in—you know, I pride myself in...you know, I ain't pressed to be about productivity, I'm going to chill, I'm going to—that's when that Taurus energy comes out. I'm gonna chill, I'm gonna watch anime, and I'm gonna get stoned and drink a glass of wine, take a bubble bath, you know what I'm saying? Do my face mask, this and that. But you know, in that class, I really had to think about as we all was talking about what it means to rest. I was like, Have I ever truly rested? And what it means to really, you know, work in the spirit of abundance and not scarcity. And this is something that I thought I was doing, but I had to realize that it's not some thing you can just be like, Okay, now I'm working in the spirit of abundance. You really have to kind of reprogram your body and your mind and everything to start working in that spirit of abundance. Because for so long, I've been working in survival mode, even though I think I work smarter, not harder, and I still feel like I'm still kind of in survival mode. So, you know, I'm thinking about creating a music project for meditation and in the pursuit of mindfulness. And I think moving forward, my work, especially for music, is going to be more, I guess, about the ideologies that I want to pursue and not necessarily like how I want to just navigate this world as a Black, queer, gender non-conforming person. So yeah, I don't know. I'm trying to get into that bag, and I just got to work through my anxiety.

TS Yeah, we all do. That's like the first step.

AA Right. So yeah, you know, that's what I got going on, coming up next.

TS Well, Abdu, it's been a pleasure to reconnect with you and to see you in person.

AA Well, thank you for having me!

TS Of course!

AA Thank you, BOMB Magazine, for hosting this. And we signin' out.

CM FUSE is produced by Libby Flores, Associate Publisher at BOMB. It is edited and engineered by Will Smith, with production assistance by Josh Dassa. I'm Chantal McStay, Associate Editor at BOMB Magazine. Our theme music is black origami by JLin. This project is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts on the web@arts.gov. Subscribe to us on Apple podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen.

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