

# Wilde

## PRESS RELEASE

Katlego Tlabela

*Feels like summer*

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WILDE | GENÈVE

### Looking, Luxuriating, Loving

Katlego Tlabela is an artist with an enviable research practice. His process is looking, luxuriating, and loving as he not only imagines a leisurely life in paint and collage but often lives it decadently and romantically, gathering information for his pictures. This is on full display in six square paintings made in the artist's Pretoria studio in 2023. Each is a scene of affluent relaxation with many alluding to loving partnership. Bodies of water are a recurring feature, mostly swimming pools, as are picturesque skies: a postcard sunset, a twinkling night, and cottony clouds against bright azure. In these paintings, champagne flows and days are spent easy in the lap of Black luxury, they are *noirveau riche* scenes on Belgian linen.

#### Looking

Speaking to Katlego Tlabela is like playing a game of ping-pong or eye-spy. References bounce and back and forth—

“Oh, this reminds me of that Noah Davis swimming pool we both love--”

“And those oceanic Kehinde Wileys, they're in homage to Winslow Homer--”

“Which reminds me of these crazy beachside photos by Daniel Morolong--”

“Woah, I've been seeing some of Neo Matloga's recent work with those in mind...”

This game could go on forever; Tlabela is an artist with an avid interest in art history. A painter for whom looking widely and deeply is essential.

It follows that he pays respects to the practitioners who make up what we might call the painter's own canon. Each of these new paintings enacts a conversation with another artist's work not just in content but in title, following the convention of *After [insert artist here]* and evidencing the South African painter's ongoing curiosity and passion for a history of images.

Previously, Tlabela would make his art historical references an explicit part of his pictures, collaging in reproductions of full works by Black artists that he admired and aspired to collect.<sup>1</sup> Now he is refining the strategy, as in a piece like *Sundays are for Lovers III* where he cuts and pastes elements from a 1961 photograph of jazz-great Louis Armstrong serenading his wife Lucille Wilson before the Sphinx in Egypt. And he is taking it further than using collaged reproductions, lifting from and reworking his inspirations in paint as well, as in one work where he cites the romantic coastal silhouettes of birds and lovers at sunset in an untitled Kerry James Marshall piece from 2008.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See: Upper East Side, New York, Katlego Tlabela, 2020

<sup>2</sup> See also: Tableau Vivant V

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With admirable confidence, Tlabela implicates himself within these art histories, as in *Sundays are for Lovers* //which calls back to a 2020 painting of his own making, 2020's *Our Flute Runneth Over*. Looking at the works side by side, the painter's evolution is quite remarkable. The earlier painting is busy, perhaps too busy, with hyper-referential objects and surfaces competing for attention in a densely packed and bordered frame. Three years later, Tlabela's increased restraint and precision is evident. This is an artist who more clearly understands his goals by staying faithful to his distinct eye: a tabletop still life occupies the foreground as in the earlier work, but now, rather than thirteen, just four objects--two champagne flutes and a pair of meticulously rendered leather bags from Black-owned designer brands Telfar (USA) and Hamethop (SA)<sup>3</sup>--sit harmoniously and suggestively before a picturesque landscape in blue and brown where the solid form of a rocky outcropping inspired by Limpopo mountains is echoed in the clouds above.

Precision shows in the painter's technique, too. Until recently, Tlabela covered every available inch of unstretched and hemmed canvas panels in oil and acrylic. He was chasing a painterly ideal of perfection through completion but now, more confident in his brushwork and with access to finer materials, he takes to squares of stretched Belgian linen and leaves patches of the woven material uncovered by pigment. This draws attention to the gesture of painting itself, an assured and experimental move for Tlabela in particular. He is an academy-trained printmaker (Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town), and a self-taught painter, still establishing his rhythms and desires in this medium, while also incorporating ink drawing and his signature collage technique. These six paintings are recognisably by Tlabela's hand but push into new stylistic territory, prodded further by a full embrace of exterior space and landscape, something of a departure from the opulent interiors and still-lives that have predominated his practice thus far.

## Luxuriating

Swimming pools appear again and again in these paintings. Their forms (mostly minimal and geometric) and their surfaces (like mini color-field paintings) are quintessentially modernist signs of leisure and freedom.

Tlabela, following in a long tradition, links water with freedom, deftly using the swimming pool motif to imagine Black freedom through Black wealth. The pool is a consistent feature across much of his oeuvre. To be by the pool is to be worry free, it's having time to relax. In the water the body is freed from gravity, suspended, really, from the rest of the world and all its troubles.<sup>4</sup> Pools are, in the artist's own words, "a beautiful thing to paint," and looking at the surfaces of Tlabela's pools, it is easy to imagine the painterly pleasure of making them. Colors and tones swirl, blend and layer together in abstract compositions set within the larger pictorial space. The pools evidence an artist eagerly reveling in the possibilities of the liquid medium, especially when rendering liquid itself.

There is something liquid in the temporality of Tlabela's paintings too. They flow in multiple directions: streaming toward the future, toward aspirational sites of opulent success; and trickling into the past by way of art history and reference. The pool becomes a window of sorts, a portal into multiple narratives and temporalities. One of the works even takes on the prodigious pool painter David Hockney; Tlabela riffs on the British artist's iconic and energetic strokes in 1967's *A Bigger Splash*. In a striking blue painting of a trio of children frolicking in a fjord-side pool under a full moon, the artist slyly teases *An Even Bigger*

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<sup>3</sup> The Small Shopping Bag and Tiebele Mini Arc Bag respectively.

<sup>4</sup> See "Swimming Pools," Zarina Muhammad for The White Pube, June 2023.

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*Splash*, all its potential held in the figure of teen diving star Zalika Methula, poised above the water's surface in anticipation...

Among the six works, *Rich N\*gga Problems Problems / Game Over After Peter Clarke's Family Fleeing from Fire, 1962*) is something of an enigma, not least because it doesn't have a pool in it. In a sparse snowy landscape, a hot red Ferrari is ablaze, spewing dark smoke into the sky. The small collaged figure of a white man,<sup>5</sup> tries to extinguish the fire while two Black men in sweatsuits by Pretoria-based streetwear brand GALXBOY pose on a blue tennis court. The pair is unbothered by the million-dollar disaster nor their Modernist white cube villa under threat of inferno.

At first glance this scene doesn't quite fit. It's less obviously romantic than Tlabela's others, and leisure gives way to emergency. But on closer consideration, many similarities emerge: we might imagine that the men on the court are a couple and that, for them, this is actually a leisurely pastime, obscene as that might be. Painting this cocky display of extravagant wealth, Tlabela hints toward a critique of the opulent worlds that he imagines on canvas. This awareness of the sticky politics of the *nouveau riche* under Black capitalism (a theme the artist has worked with for many years) gives these paintings some bite. This edge is reinforced by depictions of comfort in uncomfortable environments like icy tundras and arid deserts or the endless oceans that at once represent freedom unbound and many of the horrors of Black encounters with the west.<sup>6</sup>

## Loving

Romance suffuses the six works. It's in the implicit Romanticism of Tlabela's picturesque landscapes and the explicit romance of the lifestyles he depicts. These are paintings made by an artist in love.

Though only one work explicitly depicts a couple, two paintings titled *Sundays are for Lovers* make open ended suggestions toward partnership. In the sultry sunset of *The Argument*, twinned champagne flutes are mirrored by the silhouetted forms of palm trees, their trunks reflected in the orange mirror of the swimming pool. By not showing the occupants of his vignettes, Tlabela leaves the subjects open to interpretation and projection on the part of the viewer. Further, Tlabela is grappling with the figurative expectations made of him as a Black artist working representationally, while also maintaining a balance between art and life, public and private. Many of these scenes are derived from what the artist calls "research" with his girlfriend: dates of fine dining, luxury accommodation, and, of course, bubbles, all regularly posted on his Instagram stories. It's a lucky way to live and Katlego does not take that for granted, he enjoys every luxe and loving second, every moment of freedom through prosperity.

Perhaps, then, the most loving painting of all is Tlabela's self-portrait. Based on a photo the artist posted earlier this year. Confident and carefree, meeting the gaze of the viewer from behind dark sunglasses, and with a beer in hand, the artist's figure floats, dissolves, and disappears into wide open water, a wash of blue across the bottom half of the painting. This is self-love, it's pure ease, earned, enjoyed, and aspired. It's a cheers to the images of the past, present, and future.

Rory K Tsapayi

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<sup>5</sup> Tlabela maintains that any labor depicted in his paintings will be performed by white figures

<sup>6</sup> See: "The Unseen Depths of Winslow Homer's 'The Gulf Stream'," Mark Derry for Hyperallergic, May 2022.