



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**January 5th, 2022, Newark, NJ** Project for Empty Space is pleased to present ***SCHEHERAZADE TILLET: BLACK GIRL PLAY***, a solo exhibition of lens-based work by artist-activist Scheherazade Tillet. This exhibition is the culmination of several series by the artist created over five years in three locations – Chicago, Port of Spain, and Newark, NJ – in which the artist spent her childhood and/or worked. Building on her residency at New Arts Justice and Shine Portrait Studio at Express Newark, these collections are threaded together by the common exploration of the ways in which community tradition, playful interaction, and radical joy converge at various points in the lives of Black girls.

*BLACK GIRL PLAY* will be on view at 800 Broad Street in Newark, New Jersey, from Saturday, January 22, 2022, through Sunday, March 13, 2022, from Wednesday through Saturday, 11 - 5 pm. A public reception will be held on Friday, February 18, from 5- 7 pm. Per CDC recommendations, all visitors are required to present proof of vaccination and wear a mask to enter the Project for Empty Space gallery.

Tillet's photographs in *BLACK GIRL PLAY* depict a variety of important moments in Black girls' lives, ranging from private play in the intimate setting of home to the pomp and circumstance of prom preparations to parading down the streets of Port of Spain, Trinidad, during the Kiddies Carnival. Tillet's photographs capture an air of rarely seen intimacy and comfort. The inner glow of each piece is directly linked to Tillet's process and her ability to find points of empathy with each girl with whom she works. She is as much a caregiver and relationship-building as she is a photographer, and the relationships she develops with her collaborator/subjects resonate throughout each piece.

*BLACK GIRL PLAY* unfolds in the Project for Empty Space window gallery with an iteration of *The Black Girlhood Altar* (2021), a multimedia, artifact-based, video, and an object-based artwork that invites community members to give offerings in honor of missing and murdered Black girls and young women. Inspired by Yemaya, the Orisha in the Yoruba tradition who protects children, this traveling altar features everyday and iconic objects of Black girlhood – family photos, toys, flowers, jewelry, cosmetics, roller skates, and double dutch ropes – as a meditation on the healing power of play and the tragic consequences of it being denied to Black girls who are victims of violence. In collaboration with artists Leah Gipson and Robert Narciso, *The Black Girlhood Altar* extends Tillet's practice as an art therapist and an activist.

The main exhibition space is divided into three distinct celebrations of Black girlhood. The first phase is a collection of photographs of Tillet's niece, Seneca, from the ongoing series *Eight* (2020). These deeply personal scenes show a young girl living with her family in relative isolation, during the COVID-19 pandemic, in a seminal transition year of development.

The other works in the exhibition are also connected with Tillet's own life, but with a broader lens. The second phase of the exhibition features images from *Kiddies Carnival* (2020) that are inspired by the artist's childhood in Trinidad. Her return to the island in a pre-pandemic world enabled her to recontextualize national tradition and personal memory in the contemporary moment.

The final series included in the exhibition is a celebration of *The Send-Off* (2017), which is a longstanding Chicago tradition of preparation for young women who are going to prom. This annual ritual is more than meets the eye- it is a celebration of independence and autonomy on several fronts: each girl works hard to fund her own preparations (hair, nails, dress, limo, etc), and each takes herself to prom sans date. The Send-Off is far more than prom prep; it is also a way in which Black girls and young women participate in furthering Black-owned businesses in Chicago. It is a transition from childhood into young adulthood with the freedoms and responsibilities that come with that evolution. As with her other works, Tillet has a close relationship with her subjects. The girls featured here are activists and artists with whom Tillet has worked with in her organization, A Long Walk Home. And, true to form, Tillet's work gives the viewer the most intimate entry into this world of Black girl pride.

An important element of the exhibition is the radically beautiful resistance it presents against a historic American stereotype that robs Black girls of their childhood. Too often, Black girls are seen as sexual objects or treated as adults with a type of callous disregard for their joy and innocence. Tillet's photographs frame Black girlhood in deliberate opposition to this violent apathy towards Black children. They remind us that joy and play are not only prevalent and normal but things to be preserved and validated.

*SCHEHERAZADE TILLET: BLACK GIRL PLAY* is presented in conjunction with New Arts Justice and SHINE Portrait Studio at Express Newark at Rutgers University-Newark. It lives as part of the 2022 Black Portraiture[s] conference, now in its eleventh year. The exhibition has been made possible by the generous support of Rutgers University–Newark, Project for Empty Space, Express Newark, the Ford Foundation, New Arts Justice, the Institute for the Study of Global Racial Justice, SHINE Portrait Studio, Black Girl Freedom Fund, HarbourView Foundation, A Long Walk Home, and Duggal Visual Solutions.

#### About The Artist

Scheherazade Tillet is a photo-based artist, curator, and feminist activist who explores the themes of Blackness, play, freedom, trauma, and healing. Blending social documentary, portraiture, and social practice, Tillet intimately photographs the inner lives and public performances of Black girlhood throughout the United States and the Caribbean, while also centering the gaze of and actively collaborating with her Black girl subjects. Born in Boston, growing up in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Newark, NJ, and now working in Chicago, Tillet received her B.A. in Child Development from Tufts University with a minor in Fine Arts from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and her Masters of Art in Art Therapy from the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. Her work has been exhibited at Columbia University, Rutgers University-Newark, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and featured in *Gagosian Quarterly*, *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Teen Vogue*, and *Vice*. She is currently the Executive Director of A Long Walk Home, a nonprofit that she founded with her sister, Salamishah, in 2003, that uses art to empower young people to end violence against girls and women.

#### About Express Newark

Express Newark is a center for socially engaged art and design that brings together the community, the campus, and the City of Newark. Supported by Rutgers University, Newark, it is conceived as a “third space” for students, artists, and activists to make art that matters, addresses our city's most prevailing social justice issues, and advocates for systemic change.

#### About Project for Empty Space

Project for Empty Space is a nonprofit arts organization dedicated to creating safe and equitable spaces for social discourse. PES is committed to cultivating conversations around important social issues through the lens of contemporary art and intersectional frameworks. Its mission is to support artists whose work is oriented around

social impact and activism; and to initiate conversations that engage issues of marginality, intersectionality, and paradigmatic cultural shifts.

About Black Portraiture[s] VII: Play and Performance

Initially, a colloquium by Harvard University and New York University that was held in Paris in 2013, Black Portraiture[s] is an academic conference committed to the study of African diasporic art and culture. Hosted by Rutgers University-Newark at Express Newark in February 2022, the theme of this conference, now in its seventh iteration, is “Play and Performance,” at which “BLACK GIRL PLAY” is a featured exhibition.