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In Her First-Ever Performance, Tschabalala Self Explores a Creative Relationship in Crisis



BY **TESSA SOLOMON**  October 22, 2021 4:18pm



Tschabalala Self at the Joffrey Ballet School in Long Island City, New York.

PHOTO CHRISTIAN DEFONTE/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, PILAR CORRIAS, LONDON AND GALERIE EVA PRESENHUBER, ZURICH / NEW YORK

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With her painted collage *Sprewell* (2020), Tschabalala Self departed from her more familiar depictions of exaggerated female figures that seem to duplicate by splitting apart. In the apartment scene, a couple embrace with fragmented bodies, suggesting that we still withhold some pieces of ourselves, even in the happiest relationships. Now the artist's newest work, a performance titled *Sounding Board*, brings that motif to life.

In it, a female and male actor—both of whom remain nameless throughout—deliver dialogue written by Self that ranges from literal to the oblique. The couple's negotiations lay bare their respective desires and the gender roles and power plays underpinning this union.

Sounding Board will have a three-day run this weekend as part of Performa, the recurring New York festival known for inviting visual artists to step outside the studios and onto the stage. (Like many of the commissioned participants, Self comes to the task without training as a performance artist.) Her 3-act, 45-minute piece will unfold at the bandshell of Jackie Robinson Park in Central Harlem, where Self often spent time as a child. The actors will interact with new sculptures and furniture while wearing costumes, all elements designed by the artist. A Boney M. cover band will function as a Greek chorus of sorts, punctuating the drama with disco hits by the Afro-German troupe. Watching *Sounding Board*, audiences may feel that they've walked into one of Self's mixed-media creations, whose whimsy and pop culture sensibility only partly conceal the heavy realities of contemporary Black American life.

In the interview below, the artist breaks down the ideas behind *Sounding Board*.

ARTnews: What was it like creating your first live performance?

Tschabalala Self: I've been approaching this whole process experimentally. Toward the end of the first rehearsal, I got a better sense of what direction I wanted to go with the production, and when we met again for the second set of rehearsals, we worked on exaggerating the differences between each act. The whole effort has been super collaborative and exploratory, which is different from my normal artistic process. Making a fine art show is a solitary experience between me and the object I'm creating, whereas with this I'm spending time with the people who are the inspiration for the work. The actors are in many ways the muses, so establishing a dialogue with them has been a completely new and really enjoyable experience.

That interaction must be nice, following the long lockdown during pandemic.

I have a newfound appreciation for collaboration post-lockdown, and a new appreciation for experimenting within my art practice, not working within narrow

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constraints. Last year, there were so many restrictions. Everyone is taking the opportunity now to liberate themselves, to feel free and connected. This project has been an opportunity to do that, and to try something that is entirely out of the ordinary for me. I'm working in a public space, with a large audience in mind, as opposed to a more traditional exhibition that's confined to a specific place—which often carries its own constrictions—whether it be a gallery or institution. I've learned to appreciate the ephemeral nature of performance. The fact that this piece happens in one moment makes it special. Maybe it will be more likely to survive in someone's mind as a memory, as opposed to when you see an art show. There, you may interact with an art object through taking a photo of it, but with a performance, how you remember or interpret it becomes part of the making of it. It's an entirely new layer of collaboration.

Does it feel like this format allows for more control over the narrative? In a show of paintings, for example, you can't tell someone what to look at first, or for how long.

In my painting practice I deal with figuration and narrative, so sometimes there's a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the narrative. This play is an opportunity to have some control of how the audience experiences my artwork. As you mentioned, when you're showing a painting, you don't have the same level of control. That's not to say an artist should have—or even aspire to—total control over all aspects of what they're creating.

Would you call this a more intimate experience?

Yes and no. In a way, you're having an intimate experience, but within a public space.

What was the process like for creating this piece?

When I was first asked to participate in Performa, I was hesitant because I wasn't sure what my contribution would be, given that I'm not a performance artist. I wanted to [do the commission], but I wasn't sure how I would fit into the conversation. But they gave me a lot of encouragement to make something compelling for a live audience. We talked about the performative gestures in my studio art practice. I'm heavily invested in narrative, and interested in the idea of an interpersonal dynamic, so I thought: Let me try to write a dialogue. And that dialogue became the foundation of the entire piece—this conversation between two lovers, who I imagine are creative types. It centers around a conflict that exists because of this stage, which can be a metaphor for a number of things. There's Person A, who likes being on the stage, who feels happy to remain there, whereas Person B wants to leave.

I don't think of this as being a traditional play. It's more of an experimental play or piece of performance art that isn't linear. There are circular elements in terms of the logic and dialogue and presentation, which were influenced by the visual motifs I incorporated: shadows that obscure the stage as the repetition of speech obscures the meaning. I paid

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a lot of attention to the costuming too, down to their shoes and jacket. All the props I made are based on drawings, which includes sculptures and furniture. And all the motifs have been lifted from my paintings, and some of the furniture pieces are discrete works on their own. Every element came together bit by bit. Everything was layered and accumulated.



Tschabalala Self, *Sounding Board*, 2021. A Performa Commission for the Performa 2021 Biennial. Actors rehearsing in UGG X Tschabalala Self collaboration boots. From left to right: Hunter Byrant, Alexis Cofield, CJ Hart and Nectar Knuckles at the Joffrey Ballet School in LIC.

PHOTO BY SERGIO GUTIERREZ. COURTESY OF OJERAS

What do you think of Person A and B? Should the audience think of them as paintings come to life?

Sometimes I do think of them as live versions of characters I developed in my paintings, but they're also three dimensional. I think people familiar with my painting practice will be able to glimpse the interiority I imagined for these two. Though I'm not sure they will be truly actualized until the performance happens.

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Each actor made the dialogue their own. And seeing the variety of interpretations kind of proves that, even within certain constraints, there can be an infinite number of rearrangements. Part of this was creating a group of objects, ideas, forms, and props, and seeing what the actors could do with them or how many different angles they could find to approach the text.

Has the process of creating Sounding Board illuminated anything new for you about your practice?

This experience has opened up a lot of ideas and possibilities for my practice at large that I may not have considered before. It's shown me that whatever you've attached to your identity as an artist isn't truly your full skill set. There's a logic or philosophy that I apply to my studio practice, and I can apply those ideas to any artwork, whether it's a painting, a three-dimensional object, or a performance.

Something being finished doesn't mean it's fully resolved; it means that I realize there's nothing left for me to contribute. Maybe whatever else needs to happen with the work will happen through an interaction with the audience. I've been loose with the interpretation. I think that flexibility in tension with the natural constraints of the stage has created this exciting dynamic.

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