

Alexandra M. Thomas, "Tschabalala Self's Moving Collage," *Frieze*, October 22, 2023.

FRIEZE

Tschabalala Self's Moving Collage

For her performance at Performa 2021, the artist reimagines her colourful figures of Black womanhood for the stage

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BY ALEXANDRA M. THOMAS IN OPINION | 22 OCT 21



Tschabalala Self paints and sculpts the abundance of Black womanhood. She revels in the infinite possibilities of abstraction and mixed-media collage to form curvaceous figures instilled with a sense of embodied freedom. At times, her characters are nude and flaunting their corpulent figures, such as in *Ol'Bay* (2019) or *Two Women* (2019). Elsewhere, as in *Dime* (2019) and *Home* (2019), they are dressed in stylish New York streetwear and elegant dresses. At Performa 2021, Self will bring to life characters from her paintings in a performance entitled *Sounding Board* (2021). Understanding this commission as an invitation to experiment with the medium of performance, Self has written and designed an intimate work of theatre, set to debut 22–24 October in Harlem's Jackie Robinson Park. When I spoke to her during rehearsals, she described the upcoming performance to me as a series of parts – an experimental take on the collage form that emanates throughout her sculptures and paintings – with each element (script, stage, set, performers, audience) contributing to the lifeworld of the performance.

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Wheat-Paste campaign in Soho, New York City. Posters designed by Furqan Jawed.
Photo Sergio Gutierrez. Courtesy Ojeras

While many of Self's paintings are of individual women, couples also appear throughout her work, sometimes in the same painting and, at other times, in separate works but installed side-by-side. The script for *Sounding Board* is an experimental dialogue between creatives who are in romantic partnerships. The couples are played by performers Hunter Bryant, Alexis Cofield, Cj Hart and Imani Love. As Self explained to me: 'The audience may interpret the play as being about one couple and their shadow selves, or multiple couples.' Shadow selves have previously appeared throughout Self's paintings as silhouettes beside figures or on the walls behind the paintings.

Self has utilized sound to narrativize her visual work before: her experimental audio piece, *Cotton Mouth* (2020), accompanied her solo exhibition of the same name at Eva Presenhuber last year. The stream-of-consciousness lyrical format in *Cotton Mouth* – 'Black! pop! culture! Black! America! Africa! America!' – mirrors the collage work in her paintings. Continuing with this method, the upcoming live performance will also be

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Alexandra M. Thomas, "Tschabalala Self's Moving Collage," *Frieze*, October 22, 2023. narrated in a non-linear style. Musicians Mary Akpa, Ahmad Johnson, Alexis Lombre, Mathis Picard, Vuyolwethu Sotashe and April Webb will perform disco tunes by the German-Caribbean group Boney M. to punctuate certain moments in the play and accentuate the drama of the artsy couples navigating their relationships, echoing the choruses of classical Greek theatre.



From left to right: Hunter Byrant, Alexis Cofield, CJ Hart and Nectar Knuckles at the Joffrey Ballet School in LIC. Photo Sergio Gutierrez. Courtesy Ojeras

The piecing-together of words, thoughts and feelings through sound and visuals one way that Self's collages complicate the separation of media. Self conceptualizes her set design and costuming as a 'sculptural practice, with the stage itself becoming a sculpture for the performers to act upon'. Collaborating with numerous designers, the artist has created all elements of the stage set and props as moving parts that, when 'collaged' together, appear as a unified domestic scene out of one of her paintings, transforming the open-air venue into a place that maintains the warmth and intimacy of a domestic setting. She has also designed colourful urban-chic footwear for the

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Alexandra M. Thomas, “Tschabalala Self’s Moving Collage,” *Frieze*, October 22, 2023. performers. During the rehearsals, some performers were wearing thigh-length, high-heeled boots in red and black suede – a signature cold weather, high-femme style like the high heels and knee-length boots worn by the characters in Self’s paintings. Others were wearing black and white checked Uggs that match the tiled interiors of several canvases.

Often posed seductively, confidently and mid-gesture, inviting the possibility of further movement and hinting at a life outside of the canvas, the Black women figures in Self’s paintings strike a balance between opacity and hypervisibility – at once foregrounded yet abstracted by the disparate patterns and materials across the composition. It’s a fitting aesthetic approach for a world in which Black bodies are so often either rendered invisible or assumed readily available for mainstream consumption. In *Sounding Board*, the figures will likewise be centre stage and moving freely yet obscured by the contrasting colours and patterns of the stage and costumes.



Portrait of Tschabalala Self at the Joffrey Ballet School in LIC.
Courtesy: the artist, Pilar Corrias, London and Galerie Eva
Presenhuber, Zurich / New York; photograph: Sergio Gutierrez

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'Shadow selves' are extensions of this obscurity: the poised affect and exuberant confidence of the painted figures conceal the darker parts of their psychic interiority. These shadow figures imply that there are deeper issues facing the characters that cannot be detected in their self-assured poses. In the paintings, we see the shadows represented by silhouettes, but the play is our first opportunity to find out what issues and conflicts they represent. Self's script marks a shift from anonymous figures to characters who are lovers and fighters, vulnerably romantic as well as joyful and humorous. *Sounding Board* will introduce us to the dissenting viewpoints lurking in the shadows of Self's protagonists and their art-world relationships. As her characters move from canvases in a gallery to an amphitheatre in a Central Harlem park, Self has crafted an environment and dialogue that allows the audience intimate access to relate to and further explore the bountiful figures she depicts.

Tschabalala Self's performance Sounding Board will premier at Performa 2021 from 22-24 October 2021.

Main image: Hunter Byrant, Alexis Lombre, Alexis Cofield, Vuyolwethu Sotashe, April Webb and Mary Akpa at the Joffrey Ballet School in LIC. Courtesy: Ojeras; photograph: Sergio Gutierrez

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