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Matthew Kennedy, "We Are Seated: Tschabalala Self's 'Sounding Board,'" *Cooper Hewitt*,
February 27, 2025.



Posted by Matthew Kennedy on February 27, 2025

"A chair always implies a figure, even if no figure is occupying it."
—Tschabalala Self

Artist Tschabalala Self received a commission from the Performa 2021 Biennial and wrote, directed, and designed her first play, *Sounding Board*. The play imagines an argument between two people in a relationship—characters A and B—navigating an existential quest within the context of the stage. Performed in Jackie Robinson Park Bandshell in Harlem, the play was Self's first venture into presenting her art through performance.

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Self’s artistic practice focuses primarily on painting. Much of her work consists of intimate figural depictions layered with mixed media, creating expressionistic yet recognizable figures. The mixed-media elements Self adds to her paintings are often textile fragments from her own life, such as worn clothing; the use of a textile treatment is inspired by artist Faith Ringgold and the broad practice of quilt making.^[i] Through this layering, Self embraces the ethos of collage on a material and philosophical level.

Self refers to the figures in her paintings as “characters”—fitting ahead of adaptation into a theatrical context—noting, “I imagined some of the characters from previous works being brought to life.”^[ii] Self depicts primarily people of color, which she asserts makes the images inherently political. “In each work, there exists a tension between foreground and background that mirrors the character’s position in the larger social context.”^[iii]

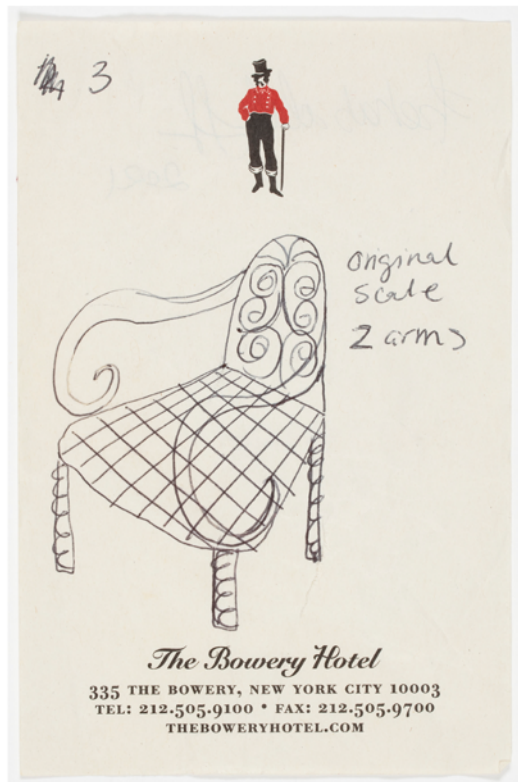
Translating an artist’s aesthetic into a theatrical context can be complicated, particularly with artists typically working in two-dimensional media. How might two-dimensional surfaces become three-dimensional forms? How much resonance with the artist’s visual work serves the theatrical piece before veering into a kitschy imitation? Self considered the play “. . . 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.”^[iv] For *Sounding Board*, Self designed the scenic elements as a sculpture, interpreting motifs in her paintings into the physical world of the stage. “I wanted to create this home, this home environment. So this is my interpretation of this real yet imagined interior space. I really wanted the environment to mimic [my] paintings—not literally in terms of how it looked, but more in terms of how the paintings feel, and really translate that in three dimensions. The furniture elements were a way to bring home the idea that these figures were within a domestic space.”^[v]

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Chair, Wide Base Lounge #3 (Yellow), 2021; Tschabalala Self (American, b. 1990). With contribution from Montgomery Harris, Iza Rodrigues (Portuguese, founded 1985). Hand formed and welded steel rods, powder coat finish, custom fabric and decor; H x W x D: 109 x 106.5 x 95.5 cm (42 15/16 x 41 15/16 x 37 5/8 in.). Museum purchase through the American Women's History Initiative Acquisitions Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Women's History Initiative, 2022-23-2-a,b



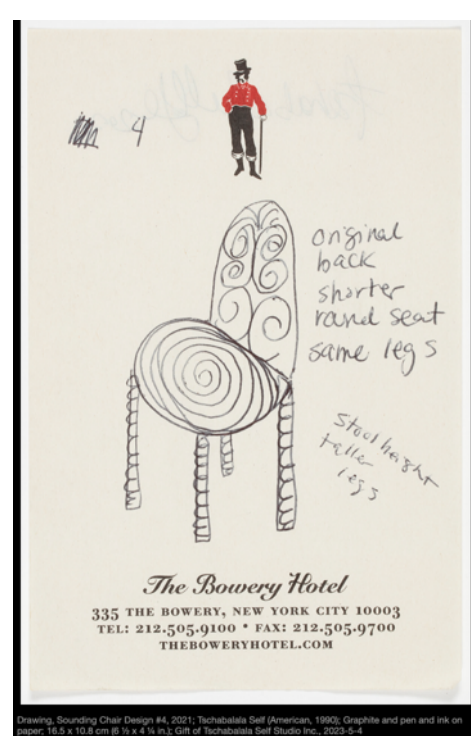
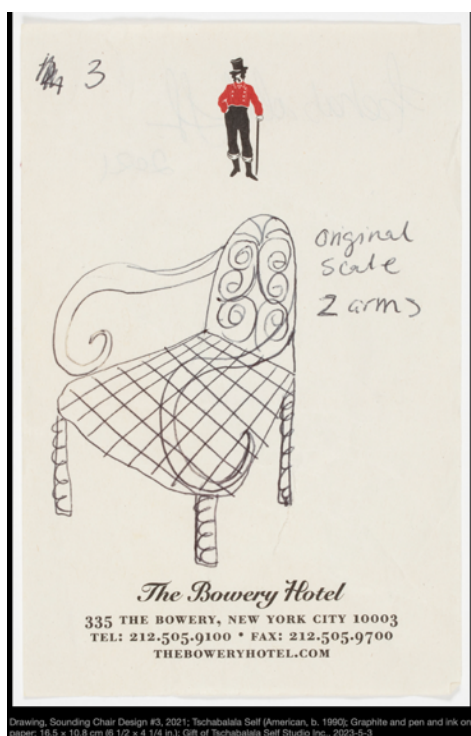
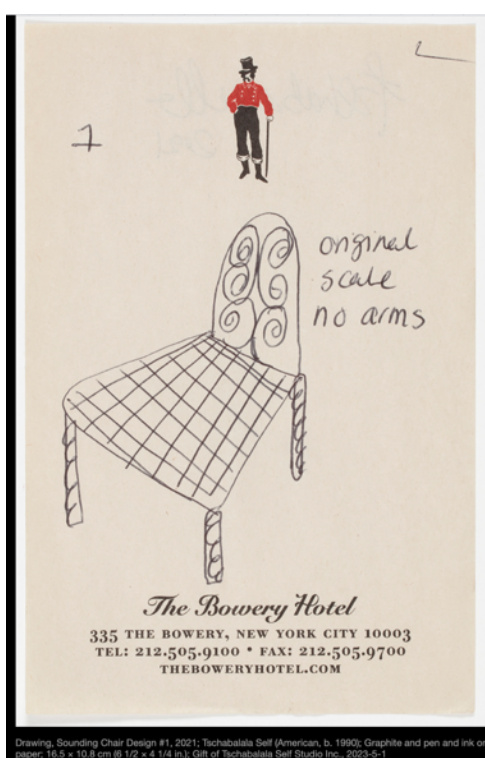
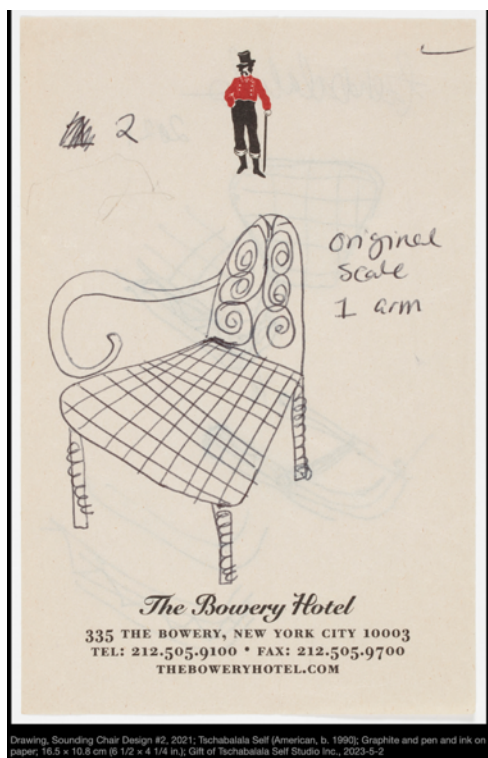
Drawing, Sounding Chair Design #3, 2021; Tschabalala Self (American, b. 1990); Graphite and pen and ink on paper; 16.5 x 10.8 cm (6 1/2 x 4 1/4 in.); Gift of Tschabalala Self Studio Inc., 2023-5-3

520 W 25th Street New York NY 10001

Tel 212 680 9467 Fax 212 680 9473 info@petzel.com www.petzel.com

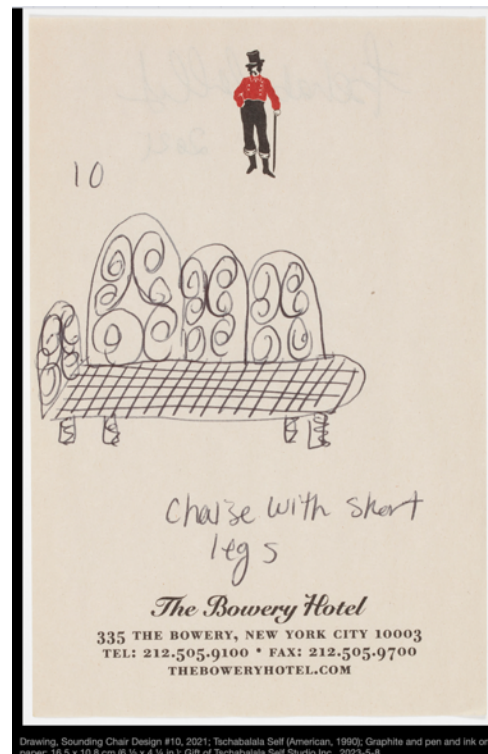
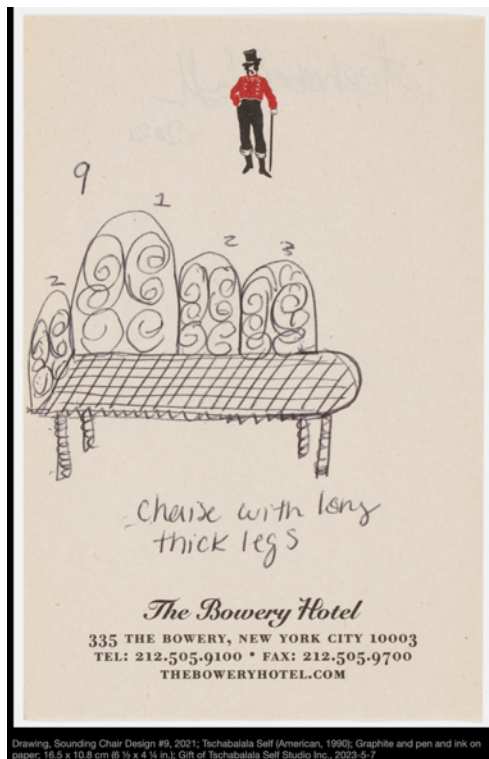
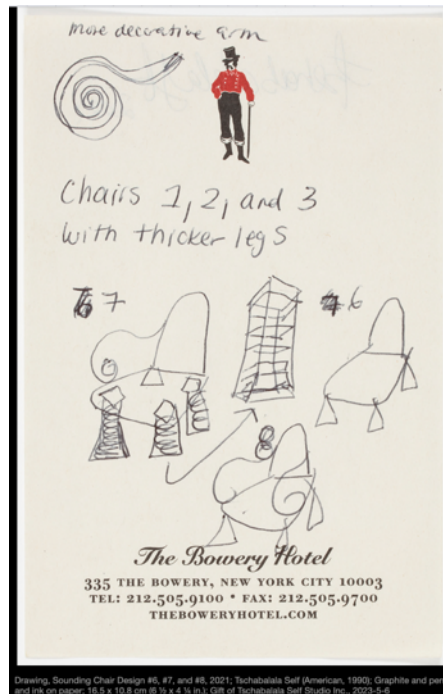
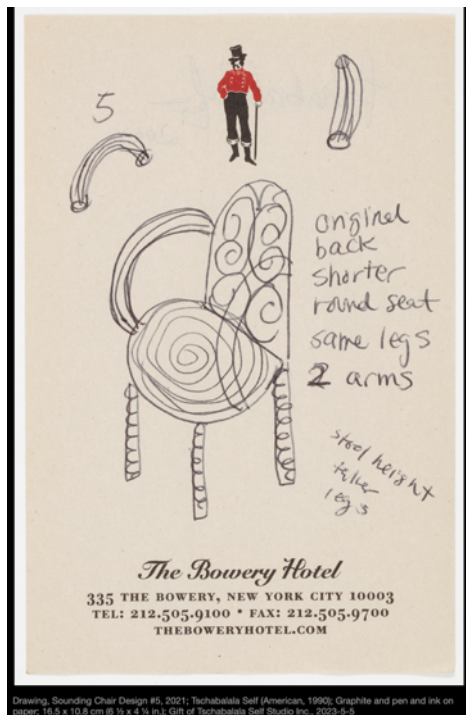
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Cooper Hewitt holds in its collection a lounge from the production, as well as drawings that depict ten iterations of seating design; design #3 most closely resembles the produced lounge used in the performance. The use of this and other chairs in the staging was intended to connote a domestic space. According to curatorial notes, "Made of hand-shaped steel coated in vibrant yellow paint, the lounge remixes various forms pulled from Afro-Diasporic cultures, including iron latticework vernacular to Caribbean architecture and a unique seating cushion constructed of West African indigo-washed batik and tie-dyed textiles quilted together."^[vi] As seen in the drawings, Self worked through details of the seating pieces' forms, envisioning possibilities for elements like the arms and legs. The produced chairs are functional and have since been used as gallery seating in exhibitions of Self's work.



Scene from Sounding Board, written, directed, and designed by Tschabalala Self for the Performa 2021 Biennial, 2021; Photo by Walter Wlodarczyk

While Self's paintings can be seen in dialogue with canonical artists like Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Henri Matisse, Self's theatrical presentation engages with modern and postmodern theatrical forms in its examination of the existential self and its context. In the work of playwrights and composers Ntozake Shange, Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee, Yasmina Reza, and Stephen Sondheim there exists abstraction of self, multiplicity of self, repetition of self, shadow or ghost of self—all vehicles driving

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theatrical expression through character. According to Self, *Sounding Board* “hinges on this idea that between character A and B there’s a conflict because they both exist on this stage—and the stage can be a metaphor for any number of things—but Character A wants to stay on the stage whereas Character B wants to leave.”^[vii] Characters A and B also have shadows—as do the figures in Self’s paintings—played by additional actors that, according to Self, can be read as shadows or as a separate couple entirely.



Drawing, *Seated Man in Blue on Wide Base Lounge #3*, 2022; Tschabalala Self (American, b. 1990); Colored pencil, acrylic paint, gouache, charcoal, graphite on archival inkjet print; 91.5 × 71 cm (36 in. × 27 15/16 in.); Museum purchase through the American Women's History Initiative Acquisitions Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Women's History Initiative, 2022-23-1

Sounding Board played three performances at the Biennial, and Self’s work on the production continued to inspire her artistic practice. She produced a series of drawings—including *Seated Man in Blue on Wide Base Lounge #3* (in Cooper Hewitt’s collection), inspired by character B^[viii]—that started while she worked out the script for *Sounding Board* and studied how the actors would interact with the furniture. The drawing series inspired paintings that became sculptures that Self thinks are the truest, most successful expression of the idea.^[ix] In this series, Self noted, “I wanted to have all

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the figures seated because I feel like a person that’s seated seems like they are settled into an environment—there’s a certain level of comfort that’s implied by that and a certain level of familiarity. Also, the chairs in general are significant because a chair always implies a figure, even if no figure is occupying it. For me, a chair is also another investigation into figuration but without having a physical body.”^[x] As with the metaphor of a chair, Self’s work collages the personal and the intimate with the contextual and the political.

Matthew J. Kennedy is the Publications Associate at Cooper Hewitt and a design and theater historian.

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NOTES

[i] Interview with Katie Delmez, "Artists Perspective Tschabalala Self," Frist Art Museum, November 17, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrecalZGfPc>. (Editor's note: the text has been edited from a spoken-word transcript for ease of reading.)

[ii] Sam Gaskin, "Tschabalala Self on Her Play for Performa, 'Sounding Board,'" *Ocula*, November 29, 2021, <https://ocula.com/magazine/art-news/tschabalala-self-on-her-play-for-performa/>.

[iii] "Information," Tschabalala Self, <https://tschabalalaself.com/information/>.

[iv] Alexandra M. Thomas, "Tschabalala Self's Moving Collage," *Frieze*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.frieze.com/article/tschabalala-self-sounding-board-performa-2021>.

[v] "Artists Perspective Tschabalala Self." (Edited)

[vi] Alexandra Cunningham Cameron, Acquisition Justification, records of Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, 2022.

[vii] Sam Gaskin, "Tschabalala Self on Her Play for Performa, 'Sounding Board,'" *Ocula*, November 29, 2021, <https://ocula.com/magazine/art-news/tschabalala-self-on-her-play-for-performa/>.

[viii] Cunningham Cameron, Acquisition Justification.

[ix] "Artists Perspective Tschabalala Self." (Edited)

[x] "Artists Perspective Tschabalala Self." (Edited)

<https://www.cooperhewitt.org/2025/02/27/we-are-seated-tschabalala-selfs-sounding-board/>