

Tiona Nekkia McClodden: *Hold on, let me take the safety off*

By **Madeleine Seidel**



Installation view, *Tiona Nekkia McClodden: Hold on, let me take the safety off*, Company Gallery, New York, 2019.

You are hit first by the contrast. The clinical white of the gallery walls behind the black leather and paint draw in and repel—equal and opposite forces. Within the freeing constraints of the gallery space, we are invited to explore an artistic vision of other types of freeing constraint: physical and psychological kinds, based off leather and trust and, most importantly, balance in pain and pleasure.

This balance that appears in the stark contrast of visual, sexual, and emotional extremes is central to Tiona Nekkia McClodden's *Hold on, let me take the safety off*. The show is a victory lap for McClodden's already stunning year: she is a current Guggenheim Fellow, and her six-channel video installation *I prayed to the wrong god for you* (2019) was included in this year's Whitney Biennial, garnering her the museum's Bucksbaum Award. Her installation juxtaposed video and

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objects, including a motorcycle helmet and wooden tools whose creation is documented in the videos, for an inventive, personal narrative on Christianity, Santería, and Southern Black culture.

The visual and thematic strategies McClodden used to explore the interplay between physical experience and the meaning of objects in *I prayed* carry over to *Hold on*. The first piece viewers encounter in the exhibition is *The Brad Johnson Tape, X – On Subjugation* (2017), which consists of the golden leather boots and suspensions from her 2017 work *The Brad Johnson Tape*, hanging in the Company doorway. The video was the result of McClodden’s research on Johnson—an under-recognized Black, queer poet who frequently wrote about sex and sexuality—and features McClodden responding to the late poet’s work by reenacting a variety of S&M scenes while reciting his prose.



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Where Johnson’s poetry was the impetus behind McClodden’s *The Brad Johnson Tape*, McClodden and poet Mia Kang provide two texts written in conjunction with *Hold on* that reference the visual motifs and themes of the installation. The “obsidian mirror” in McClodden’s text is the modified leather pelt of *BRUISER* (2019) and other works that adorn the walls. Leather in the form of mounted belts and harnesses are punctuated with single razor blades, also stuck into the walls—objects used to communicate the ritual and security within the BDSM

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community, which McClodden describes as centering and stabilizing. *THE FULL SEVERITY OF COMPASSION* (2019), situated as the centerpiece of the show, is made of a manual cattle squeeze chute similar to those used by animal scientist and autism advocate Temple Grandin to calm cows before slaughter. The piece ties together McClodden's interest in ideas of security with the diagnosis she received earlier this year that she falls somewhere within the Autism Spectrum. The two leather jacket pieces *SAPHIR* and *KELLY'S DIAMONDS* (both 2019) similarly reference the interplay between comfort, physical pleasure, and restraint.

The care McClodden takes to incorporate a variety of textures and details into the black tones of the exhibition creates a multidimensional richness, ranging from the roughest mattes to the slinkiest glosses. This is most evident in one of her best pieces *THE POETICS OF BEAUTY WILL INEVITABLY RESULT TO THE MOST BASE PLEADINGS AND OTHER WILES IN ORDER TO SECURE ITS RELEASE* (2017), a mounted leather belt with the piece's title embossed into it, a subtle detail that emerges in the bright gallery light.

There is a readymade element to McClodden's work, especially in the aforementioned *COMPASSION* and leather jacket pieces, but the alterations she makes to the objects and her clear acknowledgement of their emotional and ritualistic significance adds to the pieces. The central drawback here is that the sculptural elements of this exhibition demand to be seen together and in the order created by McClodden. Outside of *SORT OF NICE TO NOT SEE YOU BUT TO FEEL YOU AGAIN*—the standout 2019 piece consisting of a black leather office chair with a razor blade projecting from the seat in all of its evocative, violent glory—these pieces would not have the same resonance without the complete installation and texts. But, this is a very small drawback to an otherwise successful show.

Hold on, let me take the safety off is an installation of texts and objects applied as a means of communicating intense visual and physical experience. A show of brutal vulnerability and melodramatic strength, McClodden's visual practice is deeply attuned to the power of pleasure and pain, and *Hold on* reflects the artist's immaculate balance with the extremes she explores in her work.