

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

**BROOKLYN RAIL**

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

**TIONA NEKKIA MCCLODDEN**  
**with Sara Roffino**



Tiona Nekkia McClodden. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

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Since learning how to make films in a basement at Spelman College (where she was not enrolled), Tiona Nekkia McClodden has found her way from the editing room to the studio, making work that has garnered her both a Guggenheim grant and a place in the 2019 Whitney Biennial—for which she won the exhibition's top honor, the Bucksbaum Award. As McClodden's practice has expanded into sculpture, installation, and performance, her background in film and the medium's attendant concerns with time and narrative have remained central to the work she makes, while allowing her to examine content as diverse as BDSM, Santeria, Autism, the erasure of Black queer artists from the canon of art history, and the multiple potentials of readymades. Despite the seeming disparity of McClodden's interests, her fierce commitment to emotional and spiritual honesty reveals the ways in which external differences are undeniably built upon a shared experience of existence. McClodden's exhibition at Company is on view through December 22. Here, she talks with *Rail* Artseen Editor Sara Roffino about jouissance, her recent trip to the Yoruban homeland in Nigeria, and Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, among many other unrelated themes.

**Sara Roffino (The Brooklyn Rail):** You've been showing for quite a while, but I haven't been able to find so much biographical background on you, so I thought we could start there. Can you talk a little about your early memories of art and visual culture?

**Tiona Nekkia McClodden:** The first thing I remember is probably religious art because I had a children's Bible, the one that is thick and brown with the painting on it. That was one of the first art type things I had and I remember looking at the pictures and understanding that they meant something, they were supposed to make sense of all this text, which at the time was insanely difficult. I grew up in Greenville, South Carolina and I was a library kid, it was more about books than films when I was young. Up until a certain point, visual culture was heavily mediated by my father because of religious stuff. A lot of art books I had access to were about African art because I think the library in Greenville was more interested in ethnographic ideas of art than contemporary Black artist monographs. I have a deep affection for African art and folk art. And the way folk art was presented was always so casual, it was like the guy on the side of the street who had the installation-type thing and the first and only galleries I've ever seen in Greenville were galleries that showed folk art, like a door with

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a painting on it and then a picture of a Black man or woman who was the artist who had died or something. And then it was Jacob Lawrence, who I adore. That's about as good as it gets for me. The whole idea of social realism came so early for me. It gets a little more complicated as I get older because there were school field trips so I saw things like Stone Mountain, with very racist imagery and then you're supposed to go play golf at the little park next to it. I didn't go to a proper museum until I was an adult in my twenties. It really started with books and the way they read in my mind became the thing I desired, so that's what got me to film.



Tiona Nekkia McClodden, *NEVER AGAIN*, 2019. Argentinian leather, leather dye, Saphir shoe polish, spit, 31 x 32 x 7 inches. Courtesy the artist and Company Gallery, New York.

**Rail:** What sort of film were you into growing up?

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**McClodden:** I love the image primarily because I always loved documentaries and then TV films. My father would take us to the rental shop on Friday, but what we could watch was also heavily mediated. I watched a lot of foreign films because he was into letting me watch things I could read, so that was my entry point and I fell deeply in love with French New Wave as a young person, French films. I would be watching black and white films and people were like, “what the hell are you watching?” I was a very by-myself kid. I was not a normal child, I wasn’t playing. I would just watch movies over and over.

**Rail:** And then you studied film at Spelman?

**McClodden:** No, I went to Clark Atlanta University and was a double major in psychology and film and I left because it was so limited. I was blindsided by the level of homophobia and sexism and it was overall very slow. When I decided to leave, a girlfriend at the time introduced me to a man named Larry Steele who worked in Spelman College’s educational media department. That department is in the lower level of what was formerly the Bill Cosby building and when Cosby donated the building he specified that there had to be a TV studio there, but it was dormant. Larry became a mentor to me and taught me everything and that was how I learned film.

**Rail:** What do you think he saw in you that made him want to do that?

**McClodden:** I think I was consistent. I showed up every day. I was there from the beginning of the day to the end of the day, I would just be in the corner with a hoodie on trying to learn editing, photoshop, etc. I had all these crazy ideas for projects and he told me he would never mess with my creativity and that he wanted to make sure that I was so technically sound that nobody could mess with the ideas. He understood some things about my life, being queer and the kinds of films I wanted to make at the time, documentary films that talked about Black lesbian history or contemporary Black life.

**Rail:** And then?

**McClodden:** After I stole my education from Spelman [*laughter*], I lived in Atlanta for 6 years and with Larry’s help I got some work. I used to have to



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do ghost work under his name because it was hard for me to get editing work so he would take on jobs and he would pay me the money and I would do the work. Eventually I was able to step from behind and be like, “this is actually me,” and then I would get jobs in the field. I was in Atlanta from 2000 to 2006 working in the music video industry. I worked my way up to assistant director on music videos and did a lot of behind the scenes work and EPK work for music labels like Def Jam South and Roc-a-Fella records.



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

**Rail:** So you were working your way up, but you still had your own practice?

**McClodden:** I was doing videos with Gucci Mane and Jeezy and stuff like that, but I started to feel like I was going to end up staying there and just doing music videos, so I went to Philly.

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**Rail:** Why Philadelphia?

**McClodden:** I went with a couple of friends who were looking at grad schools up and down the East Coast and Philadelphia was just so cool. It felt like this magical place because I met more Black people who introduced themselves as artists than I had ever met in my life. They had websites and studios and I realized people were able to be artists there—and it wasn't just young people, it was older people too. So I was like maybe if I come here I can really push the film stuff and be in a community of people who are serious and dedicated. And it's still the place where I can make my work.

**Rail:** When did you transition into more of an art-specific scene?

**McClodden:** The definitive moment was in 2012 when I realized I hated the film industry. But I didn't set out to get into the art world. I just stopped everything and took the money I was making from film production and started to make my projects. I got a residency that really helped out because it put me in proximity to a fabrication studio where I could start learning carpentry and work with my hands. My first project was *Be Alarmed*, which is still continuing right now. It's a critique of the film industry that came from thinking about epic films, which were always a favorite of mine, like *The Neverending Story*. It's a four-part series that I worked on for almost seven years because the idea was there but there were physical things I had to learn. I debuted the work in 2014 and that was like the beginning.

**Rail:** Having started as a filmmaker who is now making sculpture, how do you see the relationship between them within your thinking and practice and the way that time relates to them both?

**McClodden:** I'm doing a talk at Yale next week, and I'll be talking about my piece *I prayed to the wrong god for you* (2019) and about the time of sculpture, but also about the timing and being spiritually correct and how making these things is just one part of it because it's also about how they get activated and how they become spiritual tools. This is something I'm very intentional about and that I want to come across in the way I document the work. I also have this idea around time and linearity and disrupting it

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and challenging the ways that I deal with my ego around it. Right now, it's fine with me if people only watch five minutes out of three hours of footage in a work. It challenges ideas of what is a whole or the beginning or the end.

**Rail:** In terms of the works being activated spiritually, you are an active practitioner of Santeria. How does that inform what you do and relate to the content of your work?

**McClodden:** I initiated in Santeria in 2012, which was also the time when I was feeling like I really needed to make a change in my work. I'm seven years old in my practice. I'm a priestess of Ogun, I was initiated in Cuba so my spiritual timeline lines up with my work in terms of being able to create in such a large capacity, but also in terms of clarity. I don't have the best relationship with my family, I definitely don't have the best relationship with my parents and even as a kid I was a person who could take care of myself. I'm the oldest child as well and there aren't many people I have to answer to, so my spiritual practice has allowed me to have some accountability to something, to some people and those people are my ancestors. A lot of the practice is a focus and investment in your Egun, your ancestors, so now I have a real relationship with my grandfather and my great-greats, people I never met that I have these relationships with.

**Rail:** The actual people?

**McClodden:** The actual people, not the idea of them. I'm very clear about them and it's very clear to me what they want from me and what they want for me. That is part of the practice itself. And then there is the Orisha engagement, the deities, the gods. As a child of Ogun, there are characterizations I carry naturally and that are very much aligned with something that precedes me. Ogun is known as the hardest worker of them all, works in the forest, doesn't like to be bothered, the god of war, the god of iron, technology. It happens to really work for me in terms of affirming the ways that I think and the ways that I am, and giving me a structure to be bound to that makes me very aware of the gravity of what I do. But also, going back to the earlier part of the conversation where I talked about my first interaction with art, to see these African objects and to understand that these things moved me then and maybe this is part of the understanding of

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how they play in my life now—that is the work. As a practitioner, I am to continue making work. I didn't feel confident or really have the understanding of that until I made *I prayed to the wrong god for you*. Last May after I had three back-to-back shows—the Eastman show at the Kitchen, the Recess residency, and then *CLUB* at Performance Space New York—I was completely worn out and went to have a quarterly reading with my Baba. That reading said that I needed to do work with Shango, and it was so clear for me and specific to the things I needed to work on, but I wanted to challenge the idea of what that work would be because there's the spiritual work which are these particular things that are private that I do but then there's the *work*. I thought about my relationship to Ogun, and I decided that I could make his tools. The making was very much putting me back in conversation with the power of making these objects that could very well end up in the same positionality and read by a community as those objects that I looked at as a kid, which was very powerful for me—to disrupt the idea of that distance and also that contemporary engagement because they are often presented as archival objects but they are always the same to me, like they're always new. *I prayed to the wrong god for you* is the only work I've ever corresponded with my Baba about over time and through divination to make sure it was correct because I was stepping into areas where other practitioners could read the things I was doing and I wanted to be respectful, I wanted to be spiritually correct.

**Rail:** How do you reconcile the more sexually explicit aspects of your work within the spiritual community you are a part of?

**McClodden:** I'm part of the BDSM community, but that has nothing to do with and would never be censored within this practice. It's not a good/bad kind of thing. It's more about an individual path and it benefits me to be all that I am. The whole core, or the concept of this whole self that I'm chasing is very much interested in all of those things. My Baba knows I'm in the BDSM community but it's not something we talk about.



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Tiona Nekkia McClodden, *KELLY'S DIAMONDS*, 2019. Leather jacket, Kelly shoe polish, Diamond shoe polish, spit, 29 x 50 x 6 inches. Courtesy the artist and Company Gallery, New York.

But I do bring some of the ways of practicing Santeria into the way I approach my practice. Like with the reading of Brad Johnson's "The Labyrinth," I use some elements of the spiritual practice to create the sacredness around the space of it. And quite frankly I'm almost approaching Brad in a deity-like/ancestor way in the sense that I'm engaging with someone who has passed and who I do not have a biological connection to, but I am part of this larger queer genealogy and I want to treat him with that same respect.

**Rail:** The same sort of respect or relationship you've developed with your ancestors through Santeria?

**McClodden:** It's the same thing. I have to do this research on my own family and that's also what I'm doing with my art, whether they are in my family or not. It's a sort of respect that you have to give because you don't want to disrupt a person's legacy. I'm not afraid of the dead but I'm extraordinarily respectful of them. When I was working on *Julius Eastman I*

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spent four years of my life because there was so much at stake because of erasure. There is a phenomenal breadth of life and if I do the work correctly people will reassess the canon and there will be an opportunity to have a referential subject that creates a kind of immortalization. In my spiritual practice, there is a gesture where you keep saying your ancestors' names because when you stop saying their names it kills them again. That kind of obsessiveness and dedication is what I put to everybody I work with. I take everything so seriously in that way because it's a disruption of time. When you do make these types of works you're still dealing with time, it's just kind of layered on top of each other.

**Rail:** Do you think of your work as a responsibility?

**McClodden:** Yeah, but at the same time I'm with the foolishness too, it's like the core. I feel a big responsibility when I deal with an archive, but it's not always to do the good thing, which is something I want to make explicit. I'm interested in disclosing my sources and my resources because if I choose to do something opposite, I want people to see the intention. If you want to critique it you can, but it's like here you go, here's the document and this is what I'm doing. I love the accountability, or the space that can create this moment of choice between truth and fact, having to kind of face off different sides of the same coin because I feel like that's life. There are the things we know and the things people know and you can't tell someone they don't know something they think they know. There is a sense of responsibility, but there's a hardcore will, and there's a hardcore decision behind it. You can see something but not necessarily be able to do anything with it and the limitations of that definitely came up in the last year for me.

**Rail:** *Jouissance* is a word that comes up often when you are talking about your work and I noticed in one of your films that it's actually tattooed on your hand. What does that word mean for you?

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Tiona Nekkia McClodden, *TNM\_ [The Brad Johnson Tape, X - On Subjugation]*, 2014-17. Gold boots, leather harness, steel chain, steel suspension hooks, 47 x 14 x 14 inches. Courtesy the artist and Company Gallery, New York.

**McClodden:** It's about the extreme, something that is to the point of pleasure that is also pain. I'm very much interested in getting as close to that split as possible. Danger, but also a deep affection, there is the core concept that is very much philosophized, but I think I came across it in allowing myself to go to a place that is actually oddly comfortable for me, but maybe reads as extraordinarily difficult for others. In *The Brad Johnson Tape*, from 2017, I was reading his archival pieces where he is talking about exercises he engaged in, S&M kind of stuff, and I was so fascinated by the language he gave to very difficult polarizing feelings. He spoke from the position of this Black gay male subjectivity that oddly I identified with for

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one of the first times because it became something that was outside of the ideas around genital-based sex which is something that exists in BDSM practices because you are not always engaging in that form. The thing I set out to do was to try match a physical engagement associated with BDSM with what I read to see if the feeling I experienced while reading was the same as the physical. That's *jouissance*, the point I was pushing, I wanted to get that snap—that very very brief moment—to get reference for the work, the show I have up now, that physical research is what that work was, and how I get to this work.

**Rail:** I was struck by the way you describe your physical reactions to emotional or intellectual experience in the piece you recently wrote for *Triple Canopy*, reading something that made you feel like your skin was going to peel off your body or encountering a text that hit you so hard you didn't get out of bed for three days. How does that space between mind and body exist for you?

**McClodden:** The flatout answer, as I've recently disclosed, is that I have ASD, Autism Spectrum Disorder. I was just diagnosed in January, but it's something I've known since like 2001 when it was first brought up in an early therapy session, but I was too scared to go and confirm. So that nonverbal feeling thing is me at my most honest self. The hard part is the translation, the talking. I've trained and worked so hard to be able to communicate. I want to be able to write in a legible way. The *Triple Canopy* piece was a big deal for me because I wanted people to read it and not have it be abstract. But that's how I feel every day, I have very visceral, physical reactions to things, colors, sounds and hypersensitive kinds of engagements that I've learned to keep together. I think I can temper it because of my spiritual engagement, it helps me deal with things a little bit better.

**Rail:** Has knowing this affected how you engage with your work?

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

**McClodden:** As someone who is living in such an abstract way, abstraction as form is terrifying for me. I can easily start to feel lost, it can feel vacuous and odd, like things are going to fly away and I'm not going to be able to talk. To get to this work I put myself slowly through these different kinds of processes to feel comfortable doing something so abstract. That show isn't something that people would expect from me. There aren't any films, the paintings are made with shoe polish, because the core framework is thinking about leather, but also thinking about accountability and psychological landscapes. There's a chair I remember sitting in during an early therapy session, a Marcel Breuer Wassily chair that is facing the cattle squeeze chute that Temple Grandin has made a version for herself and for folks with Autism to deal with their hypersensitivity. That's like my psychological landscape and then all of the leather around it is there to remind you of the feeling that the cow gets, the pressure that calms them down before they are killed, is the same thing you want to feel when you put on your leather jacket or when you put on your boots. You want to feel that same pressure, which is necessary to provide the protection. If the



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leather is worn in a protective state, whether you ride bikes or do construction, or the linemen belts which are worn by people who suspend themselves off of buildings. So it's about dealing with all of these ideas abstractly, but with objects, some of which could be considered readymades.

**Rail:** I wasn't sure what the belts were used for, can you talk a little more about them?

**McClodden:** I have the belts hanging upside down because a lot of the work is also about the suspension of disbelief, which is what I think the animal and the human have in that moment of feeling held—it's like a lie or a mercy of sorts. With the cow it's a mercy, but that moment is very much not the truth. You put on leather and then do the most dangerous things, like ride a bike or hang off the side of the building and that belief that you're protected makes you able to do these things, which is something I'm fascinated by. My engagement with leather is very basic. People think it's aesthetic, but not at all. I like the way it feels. I like that it immediately matches my temperature and that it hugs me and that the straps and harnesses pull me back and make me feel confident. It's very basic.

**Rail:** You mentioned readymades and I was hoping anyway to ask you about the urinal in your film *The Labyrinth 1.0* (2017). It's not really possible to use such an object without people thinking about Duchamp—

**McClodden:** I like Elsa [von Freytag-Loringhoven] more than I like Duchamp. I love that piece of hers, *God* (1917), it's so sexy. I'm thinking about Duchamp, but I'm also thinking about the affection of the desire of men and women who like to be fucked in bathrooms, cruising, it's brutal. This is what I like about the art world, you can do your thing and then be like this is what this is about.

**Rail:** I had to ask.

**McClodden:** I like that someone would put this next to Duchamp, sure. But in *The Labyrinth 1.0* it's a point of entry to the moment with my two Brads, my woman Brad and my man Brad, who are exhibiting opposite qualities, feminine and masculine. The structure of the bodies of these two people

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manifests this energy of this guy for me. I was interested in the conversations I had with people who are bottoms who have had engagements where their body is facing away from someone they desire and that someone comes behind them and they are turned on and that is a point of desire for them. I would talk with them about urinals and I had a conversation with someone who likes to lick urinals—it's a desire that is tied to a sexual moment of pleasure for them, so for some people the urinal and the urinal valves become a thing. There are some people who never look behind them to see who the person is, they look in the valves which are like mirrors. So yeah, Duchamp.



Tiona Nekkia McClodden, *USING LOVELY THINGS AS TOOLS FOR WAR*, 2019. 9 White T-shirts, steel hangers, steel pipe, 30 x 48 x 24 inches. Courtesy the artist and Company Gallery, New York.

**Rail:** As part of making *I prayed to the wrong god for you*, which was in the Whitney Biennial, you traveled to Nigeria. I observed pieces of your trip on Instagram, but I don't have a sense of the whole undertaking.

**McClodden:** My goal for *I prayed to the wrong god for you* is that before it

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is sold somewhere it will be able to travel throughout the diaspora in the ways I have traveled. Underneath it all, I'm thinking about what it means to think about repatriation of these objects. I made this object on American soil, I had it consecrated in Cuba where I was also initiated and then I took it to Nigeria to present it to a shrine, to place it in a diasporic conversation. I also do that with my own body. I don't know if I ever would have gone to Ibadan otherwise. Ibadan is the capital of Oyo state of Nigeria, which is known as the birthplace and the empire of the Yoruban god Shango. Knowing what has happened to queer individuals as well as practitioners of Santeria or African religions post-Christianity has troubled me. I'm not native to the country so I didn't know how I would be received. Doing this work in this way gave me a courage, and it also gave me a truth. There was a tense moment when I was there. I went to the shrine and they looked at me like I was crazy. I had a leather jacket on and I read visibly queer, but when I took my jacket off and I took my *elekes* [beads] from under my shirt and sat down they immediately knew I was part of it and they took care of me. I had to work against a lot of the fear that is embedded from these narratives, but I saw that these *elekes* allowed me to have a legibility for something and a moment that crossed all of this was very affirming for me.

**Rail:** Amazing. Are you now planning for a show at the Whitney as part of receiving the Bucksbaum Award?

**McClodden:** I'm not going to do a show at the Whitney. We're going to do something, but we're still talking about how it's going to work. One year isn't enough time for a show.

**Rail:** You were very outspoken and took a really independent position with all of the controversy around Warren Kanders and Decolonize This Place and artists pulling out of the Biennial. You were very clear about keeping your work on view as well as problems you saw with the tactics artists and activists were using. How do you feel about it all now that a little time has passed?

**McClodden:** People didn't really understand what was going on for me during that time. I was taking care of my mother from December through May and I also had a very strong directive about what I needed to do for myself and what this work demanded. I knew about a difficulty before it was

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made explicit. I wasn't going nowhere. If they set that building on fire, okay fine, pay me the insurance, I'm not taking my work out because for me it was very important to see this all the way through. For me, it wasn't just a work, it was tied to my care, I needed to see it, I needed to know it was there. It needed to stay put. And I'm someone who was very active in critiquing what happened in the 2017 biennial and that's on record. She ain't going nowhere, I ain't going nowhere. It was simple for me. I was like, "ya'll tripping if you think I'm going somewhere."

**Rail:** I'm not questioning your position, but asking more about how it feels with a little perspective.

**McClodden:** I think it actually allowed me to have more in-depth conversations one-on-one with my peers, on the backend. It happened that way because I refused to be on the mailing list, I was like "don't call me to these meetings. I'm on my own, I don't care about this group show shit. Ya'll have not been in the gym with me." It's the first time I've ever been like that because I am a team player, but I was like "I'm not playing with ya'll because I don't trust you, you don't have the same feelings I do and I am not even supposed to be here." I don't come from the same pedigrees. I don't have any degrees. I have my high school degree. I dropped out of college. I never went to an MFA. I needed to see it through. I was also wrestling with my diagnosis at the time, so when the Bucksbaum came I was like, "huh..." [*Laughter.*]

**Rail:** Did you have any sense?

**McClodden:** Absolutely not, no way. I didn't even know what the award was until Scott [Rothkopf] mentioned Sarah, who had a show up while mine was up at Performance Space New York. Scott called me and I didn't even answer the phone and then he texted me and said to call him. I thought somebody had broken my work because I was getting weird feedback because it's a work that deals with Christianity and people saw it as blasphemous. I thought someone punched the vitrine or messed something up. That whole call was like "wow." It came at a very odd time and it was super interesting in regards to thinking about space and time. It was a moment where I was really just ready to get on with my life, I was deeply in this show for Company. They announced the Whitney and then right after

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they announced that I got the Guggenheim and then this comes and I'm just like "what else can I get?" At the end of the day I want to know I can stand next to these people and make good work and I think "now I can doubt myself less."