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Tiona Nekkia McClodden Is Not Running Away

An artist's journey to establish her position in the world took her to the shooting range and produced a bold, original show.



Tiona Nekkia McClodden at her studio in Philadelphia. Her newest gallery show, "Mask/Conceal/Carry," at 52 Walker in New York, includes shooting targets used for dry firing (without ammunition), right, and a series of banners, left. Hannah Price for The New York Times

By Siddhartha Mitter

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PHILADELPHIA — The artist [Tiona Nekkia McClodden](#) hit the gun range

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on a sweltering Monday in July. The air was sticky inside the facility, but her routine would not be denied. She shoots every week and avoids weekends, when the range gets crowded and loud with men firing off assault-type rifles, inviting sensory overload.

It might be a familiar activity for some Americans. Less so for an artist. But McClodden, 41, a [star of the 2019 Whitney Biennial](#) who has three major presentations of work now up in New York City — at [52 Walker, the Shed](#), and the [Museum of Modern Art](#) — didn't purchase guns and get her carry license two years ago with art in mind. At least at first.

She did it — like many other Black Philadelphians, she recalls — after the pandemic drained the streets, and then the George Floyd protests and counter-protests filled them with interlopers and a sense of swirling violence. Safety and self-defense were her concerns.

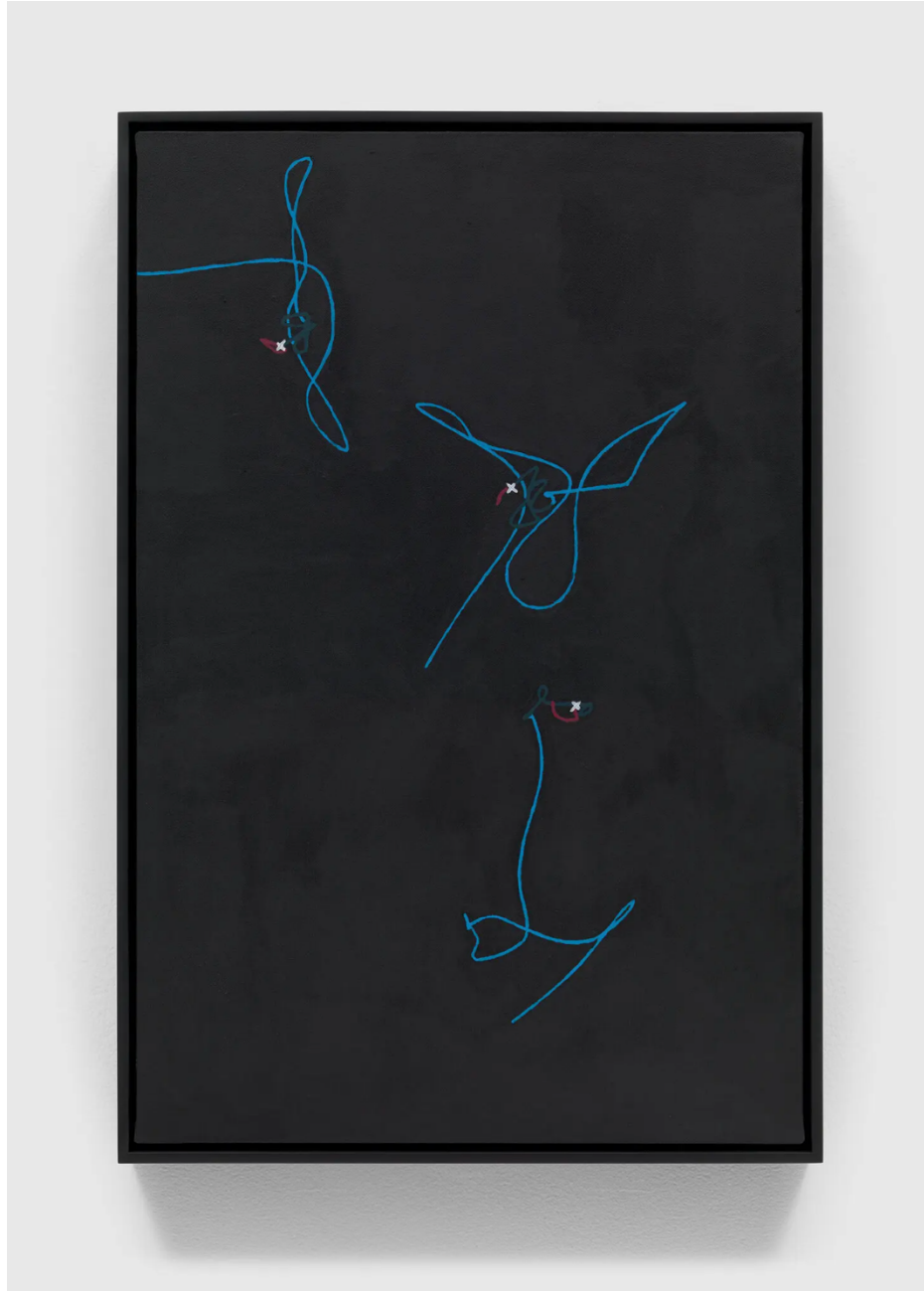
The staff at the range greeted her warmly — she trained here, earning her membership. She bought ammunition and paper targets with pink silhouettes or multiple oval bull's-eyes. At her lane, she took out her three handguns — a Walther .22 with a Glock and Smith & Wesson, both 9-millimeters — and placed them before her, with care.

“Every bullet that I load, I'm breathing through it,” she said. “I'm adjusting to being in the space. There's a protocol.”

An hour later, McClodden was headed to her studio in North Philadelphia. She had concluded her target practice, as always, with a sequence where she drew methodically, before each shot, to break the machine-like spell of firing without pause. This put the human stakes directly in her thoughts — reminding her that this isn't a game. “There's life there,” she said.

It wasn't for art — but art happened anyway. The result is “Mask/Conceal/Carry,” a brooding beast of an exhibition, bathed in blue light, at 52 Walker, the David Zwirner space in TriBeCa.

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McClodden's "A Study in Qualification 93.8 Smith + Wesson 9mm / 91.2 Smith + Wesson 9mm / 90.2 Smith + Wesson 9mm," 2022. She traced in paint the data gathered from a shot she fired. "It's like a graphic score," she said. via Tiona Nekkia McClodden and 52 Walker, New York

It finds McClodden, who emerged as a filmmaker before expanding to installations, at her formal broadest, including videos, sculptures, bronzes, text and her first painting series. But its theme is tight: An artist's journey through shooting to confront herself and establish her position in the world — in all the facets of her identity.

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Bold, frequently jarring, the exhibition forms a kind of triptych this season with McClodden's other Manhattan presentations: a room-size installation at MoMA that is a tribute to [Brad Johnson](#), a Black gay poet who died in 2011, with a bondage and fetish theme; and at the Shed, a sweeping program she curated on the history of Black dance.

The result is three ways to meet an artist who may be America's most essential today, one who is adamantly individual and searingly frank about race, gender, sexuality, spiritual life and more — the better to carve a responsible role in the culture. Celebrating a forgotten figure like Johnson, or an entire field like Black dance, is her way to acknowledge and renew artistic lineages — a kind of accountability.

"This is all a practice in not being ignorant," she said. "Period."



A bronze casting by the artist of a drum magazine, a high-capacity container that holds 50 shots. "The Fiefs of Ruthful Specters — Drummer. Oh how we will die for you, a thousand deaths, drums for the god till our hands bleed, endlessly," 2022. via Tiona Nekkia McClodden and 52 Walker, New York

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Masking is a recurrent theme in McClodden's work. The title is "If you had ever thought that you saw me let me assure you that you have not seen me as I know my self because I have not found you worthy of this image," 2022. via Tiona Nekkia McClodden and 52 Walker, New York

On the wall by her desk were her talismans — a poem by Johnson, a photograph of Jean-Michel Basquiat, and a dark object that bristled with short vertical spikes. It was a rustic tool used to remove seeds from cotton, redolent with associations with Black labor. "It's the most painful thing in the studio," she said. "I have it there because it's a representation of a feeling — something that causes me immense distress but is almost unseen."

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Topping one pile of books was “[Unmasking Autism](#),” a new work by the psychologist Devon Price. Back in 2001, McClodden said, a doctor suggested that she was on the autism spectrum but she dismissed the idea. “I took it as a negative,” she said. But in 2019 she received a diagnosis — it took time and was expensive — and she continues to embrace its insights.

“I hid for a long time,” she said. She lived with the symptoms — overstimulation, nonverbal periods, confrontational behavior — while forging on with her art. Now it offers guidance. “I’ve decided to match my lived experience as a person with autism, at the intersection of a lot of identities, as a constant state of discomfort,” she said. “So the work has to be uncomfortable.”

Her autism experience played a role in the alchemy of events that produced “Mask/Conceal/Carry” (and adds another layer of meaning to the title). When she started training to shoot, the noise and action were overwhelming. “My sensory issues sent me out of the range,” she said. “I couldn’t get the sound off my skin.”



On her Philadelphia studio wall is stenciled text on canvas from a new series rotating through the show. Some read like mantras. “It’s from a training on how to live with difference,” said McClodden, who in 2019 received a diagnosis on the autism spectrum. Hannah Price for The New York Times

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In the studio are a toaster oven and a vacuum press for making sculptures out of Kydex, a synthetic material used for gun cases. Hannah Price for The New York Times

To ready herself, she took up dry firing — shooting without ammunition — in the studio. A phone app measured data from a node on the gun and she incorporated the information in paintings: They are black with a few squiggles in blue, green, white or red segments, tracing in paint the data report on a shot. “I can feel in my body everything that I see here,” she said. “It’s like a graphic score.”

In the studio were a toaster oven and a vacuum press for making sculptures out of Kydex, a synthetic material often used for gun cases. On the studio wall were stenciled texts on canvas, from a new series. Some read like mantras: “Train to Failure,” “Hold Everything At Once.”

“It’s from a training on how to live with difference,” she explained. Other messages to herself — “Black Insanity on the Ledge of a Death Star” — had a wilder feel. “It’s almost like the name of a punk band,” she said.

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The books in her library suggest other influences on the show, including titles on trauma and race; the sculptor [Nancy Grossman](#), whose heads evoke ritualistic bondage; the Benin bronzes, and W.E.B. Du Bois's pioneering data portraits of Black America. "He's able to deliver information about the dire circumstances of an entire group of people," she said.

Shopping online for targets, McClodden discovered a world of photographs of staged scenes: a shooter behind a car, a hostage situation. They are often used in law enforcement training and she was intrigued that almost all the figures were white. She made a video where a sequence of images reveal a single dark silhouette beneath these characters.

But McClodden is here to observe, not to opine. Sure, she has views — she supports "[red flag](#)" laws that would prevent potentially dangerous people from owning guns; opposes gun access for minors, and "wouldn't mind" an assault rifle ban. But this is not a show about gun policy.



"Precision, in Spite of a Threatening Figure," 2022, a still, from her installation at 52 Walker using a staged scene from law enforcement training. via Tiona Nekkia McClodde and 52 Walker, New York

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“I’m not interested in articulating or taking on grief for the larger society, as a Black woman,” she said. “I’m telling you how I sleep well at night. This is the regimen that I took to know of this time.”

Ebony L. Haynes, the director of 52 Walker, who curated the exhibition, said that the show may feel well-timed but that it is not about the news. “The material that Tiona is working through has a long history that is important to uncover,” Haynes said.

“If ‘social change’ even creeps into my work,” McClodden said, “I’m destroying it.”

McClodden has a samurai-like reputation in the art world, reinforced by her choice to remain in Philadelphia — where she has turned her studio annex into a micro-gallery and reading room called [Conceptual Fade](#) — and to keep distance from the New York and market scene. Her friends pull between expressing their own admiration and pointing to her lighter sides.

“You use thumbtacks, Tiona uses a razor blade,” [Sadie Barnette](#), who shared residency time with her in 2018 at the Skowhegan School, said of her precision. At the same time, “she’s this person who drinks fancy whisky, D.J.s the best party of the summer, and is kind.”

“People are scared!” the artist [Kevin Beasley](#) said. “She has that ability to tighten up the space just by entering the room.” He added, “She’s the audience you want to have, someone who makes you more conscious of the decisions you make.”

McClodden talks frankly about her edge. “I’ve worked on some of my difficulty,” she said, “because I had to understand what it is.”

She grew up in Greenville, S.C. The family had times of instability and transience. She was smart and drawn to photography, and gravitated to the punk scene. She enrolled at Clark Atlanta University but dropped out.

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Installation view of “Mask/Conceal/Carry” at 52 Walker includes banners, objects and a series of paintings involving data from firing exercises. via 52 Walker, New York

She is lesbian — she uses the term proudly, convinced it is being marginalized — and talks fondly about her mentors: “The butch, the bulldaggers, those are the folks who took care of me when I was sneaking off to the clubs.” For her [first film](#), in 2008, she interviewed some 50 Black lesbians of different backgrounds. “I was trying to complicate that monolith,” she said.

She found homes, too, in the BDSM and kink world, and in African and Afro-Cuban spirituality; she is initiated in Santería, and her orisha is Ogun, the god of iron and war. His force is felt in her [epic installation for the 2019 Whitney Biennial](#), which involved felling a tree by axe in Maine, carving ritual objects from its wood in the studio, carrying them to Cuba and Nigeria and filming the process. It earned her the \$100,000 [Bucksbaum Award](#) given to an exceptional Biennial artist. Adam Weinberg, the Whitney’s director, called her contribution “extraordinarily rich with cultural, historical, and spiritual resonances.”

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Her fearlessness is currently on view at MoMA in “The Brad Johnson Tape, X — On Subjugation,” a work first produced in 2017 and recently acquired by the museum, where she filmed herself reciting Johnson’s poetry while hanging by her ankles from a rig. Fetish objects, books and an avalanche of rose petals complete the display.

“The work offers an extraordinary model of freedom,” said [Lanka Tattersall](#), a MoMA curator of drawings and prints. “To understand and express your sexuality and erotics to the limits of your possible comfort is one of the biggest offerings an artist can give.”



Installation view of Gallery 211 at MoMA: “The Brad Johnson Tape, X — On Subjugation,” shows McClodden hanging by her ankles as she reads poetry. The curator called it “an extraordinary model of freedom.” via The Museum of Modern Art; Robert Gebhardt

McClodden’s project at the Shed celebrates [Dance Black America](#), a groundbreaking 1983 festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. It includes custom dance floors, video portraits of dancers of different styles and generations, and a performance series. One subject is [Mikki Shepard](#), who produced the original event.

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Film still: a portrait of Mikki Shepard, left, by McClodden, right, from “The Trace of an Implied Presence,” 2021, a multichannel HD color video currently showing at the Shed. Tiona Nekkia McClodden

“I’m glad she discovered it,” Shepard said. “She’s documenting it again but through a fresh pair of eyes.”

McClodden recalls spending long stretches during the pandemic driving in Louisiana and Mississippi, researching “[Play Me Home](#),” her installation in the Prospect 5 triennial in 2021. It was a roots journey. She located relatives, saw lands they hold and other sites lost to predatory leases. She remembered how men in her family — always men — — frequently hunted, and served in the military.

To know herself as a shooter deepens this intimate voyage. But the art is a record for history. “This is about to be material culture of this time,” she said. “The statement is that I’m in the world, I didn’t try to run away from my position in this world, and I wanted to be able to defend myself.” She added: “I’m not trying to hide behind slavery, or something in the 1700s. I’m like: In 2020 to 2022, this is what I was doing.”