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# ARTFORUM

## STEP BY STEP

Tiona Nekkia McClodden's living archive of Black dance

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View of "Tiona Nekkia McClodden: The Trace of an Implied Presence," 2022, the Shed, New York. Photo: Maria Baranova.

**FOR TIONA NEKKIA MCCLODDEN'S** latest work, *The Trace of an Implied Presence*, currently on view at the Shed in New York, the artist has installed four dancefloors in the second-floor gallery, each tailored to different specifications. Two are covered in Marley (one black and one white). Two are made of hard wood. Suspended above each dancefloor is a screen, onto which are projected color and black-and-white filmed portraits of Black performers. Here McClodden presents Michael J. Love, a tap dancer and scholar, striking complex rhythms against the floor; Kim Grier-Martinez, current artistic director of the Rod Rodgers Dance Company, talking about Rodgers's legacy and Black expression in modern dance; Audrey and June Donaldson—

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two revivalists of Philly Bop—demonstrating their practice of this Black social dance from Philadelphia; and performer-choreographer Leslie Cuyjet mining her own personal dance lineages through improvisation.

In addition to interviews and performances from those artists, McClodden drew on video material from the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Hamm Archives, specifically footage of the 1983 Dance Black America Festival, which included trailblazing Black movers such as Alvin Ailey, Katherine Dunham, and Asadata Dafora. Mikki Shepard, who produced the festival and acted as McClodden's historian guide, also appears in the videos. McClodden's most significant gesture here is to step aside and grant the performers a space to present themselves on their own terms. She understands that, for an artist, the studio's most valuable asset is its emptiness. Instead of enlisting her performers to "activate" otherwise dormant installations—as is so routine in institutional exhibitions about dance—McClodden makes their movement the heart of the work. Her floors are gifts, and in a private ceremony before opening night, she invited Love, the Rod Rodgers Dance Company, the Donaldsons, and Cuyjet to take the first step.



Tiona Nekkia McClodden, *The Trace of An Implied Presence*, 2021, multichannel HD video, color, sound.

In their interviews, the dancers talk about how embodied knowledge is passed from dancer to dancer—an archival process in itself, and one that resonates strongly with Black history-making in the United States, where “official” archives have long attempted to erode Black memory. Each

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dancer's methods of exploring their lineages differ. Grier-Martinez, in describing her dancers' efforts to recapture the exact physical language of Rod Rodgers, explains how important it is for the young dancers in the company to mirror Rodgers's own movement as closely as possible, to perfect the carriage of the arms and the twisting of the torso. Their preservation is a form of ritual devotion. Cuyjet's reckoning with the past is less fixed and more embracing of forgetfulness and disruption. Her great aunt, Marion Cuyjet, was one of the first Black women to study ballet in Philadelphia. (Black dancers were not permitted to learn ballet at the time; being fair-skinned, Marion was able to pass.) Flashes of history emerge from Cuyjet's gestures and poses before dissolving along her line of movement. She lies on her back, claps her hands in front of her mouth, generates an impulse from her pelvis which throws her limbs into sophisticated discordance. To trace can be to follow a line into the past as well as to create a faint outline. Cuyjet does both.

Dance's relationship to the archive is an unstable one; being a live art, its essence is impossible to capture. At least, this is how we like to mythologize it. The camera provides a reliable record of movement, although it sets down only a shadow of a dancer's quiddity. This elusiveness is also what makes dance inescapably freeing. Freedom from what? One achievement of *The Trace of an Implied Presence* is its interpretation of dance as simultaneously free from and intimately conjoined to the past, as McClodden contends with the complex project of locating reparative narratives in the Black American archive while creating places where alternative histories and futures—in particular, celebratory and joyous ones—may spring forth.

As much as McClodden's dancefloors invite participation, they also suggest a line not to be crossed. Audiences at the show's opening night tested the work's boundaries, tapping their feet on the floors' edges to gauge their springiness and grip. The Donaldsons placed their tote bags to one side and danced together while their filmed selves danced above them. Elsewhere in the room, a woman wearing high heels demonstrated a double-time step—a tap-dancing standard—for her friends. Most attendees remained spectators, perhaps recognizing that the dancefloors' vacancy was crucial to their sanctity. This is not to say the exhibition demands somber reverence. People can move their bodies on the dancefloors or on the sidelines. They can stand still and observe. From any vantage point, presence connects us to the traces of the past the archive cannot contain.

—Rennie McDougall