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 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

Tiona Nekkia McClodden: *The Trace of An Implied Presence*

By **Anna Cahn**



Installation view: *Tiona Nekkia McClodden: The Trace of an Implied Presence*, The Shed, New York, 2022. Artwork © Tiona Nekkia McClodden. Photo: Maria Baranova. Courtesy The Shed.

Tiona Nekkia McClodden's *The Trace of An Implied Presence* features an ambitious multimedia installation that follows the living history of contemporary Black dance in America. Upon entering the gallery, one encounters a massive multichannel video installation in a large, darkened room. Custom-made dance floors are paired with each video screen, corresponding to the dance style being presented. Their surfaces are

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reflective and open—mirrors are placed on two of the dance floors, all illuminated in spotlights, and screens float above the floor hovering in space.

Inspiration for this project came from McClodden's time spent researching in the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Hamm Archives, specifically BAM's historic 1983 festival, Dance Black America (DBA), curated by Mikki Shepard and Patricia Kerr Ross. Shepard's presence floats in and out of the videos—cutting into scenes unexpectedly to discuss the 1983 DBA festival and its celebration of over 300 years of Black dance. Just as Shepard virtually shifts in and out of the periphery of the installation, so do the physical bodies of audience members, performers, and dancers, who are invited to use the dance floor space as they please. On opening night, dancers from the New York and Philadelphia dance community (many of whom were documented in the videos) gracefully moved across the dance floors. These were not formal performances, but rather a response to McClodden's open invitation to professional and novice dancers to use the space freely. *The Trace of An Implied Presence* unfolds like a love-letter to Black American dance, as McClodden artistically traces its social, intellectual, and cultural movement across multiple generations of dancers.

In an interview, Shepard tells McClodden that DBA asked its audiences and participants: "What is Black dance?" By the end of the festival it was clear that there was no singular definition. McClodden seems to be re-asking this question in a search for new answers. Piecing together her own network of dancers, each video and dance floor acts as a unique portrait of five dancers and choreographers. The dancers are interviewed on camera by the artist, who remains mostly behind the lens, and is interspersed with shots of them rehearsing, improvising, and performing.

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In one of the video portraits, performer and choreographer Leslie Cuyjet discusses her feelings about inclusion and alienation within the dance community. She traces her legacy to her late great aunt, Marion Cuyjet, who was a pioneer in advocating for Black dance education in Philadelphia. As a light-skinned Black woman, Marion was able to pass as white and attended the Philadelphia Ballet Company during a time when Black dancers were banned from study. She later opened her own dance school and remains a seminal figure in the history of ballet and its relationship to Black American dancers. Leslie Cuyjet ruminates on these persistent issues of erasure and exclusion in the dance world today and continues to confront them in her own practice.

Another video features Philadelphia's iconic dance, the Philly Bop. This piece focuses on the dance duo Audrey and June Donaldson, who continue to act as

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community leaders, teachers, and dancers of the Bop. In this work we learn the Bop is taught in social settings and relies on community members passing the steps to the next generation for the dance to live on.

Just as narratives are passed down and retold, so are choreographies. This is most poignantly conveyed in the interview with artistic director and choreographer of the Rod Rodgers Dance Company, Kim Grier-Martinez. She discusses the importance of carrying on the spirit of Rodgers's original choreography, which endures as younger dancers reinterpret and embody his movements in new ways.



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While speaking to the liberating possibilities of movement, interdisciplinary tap dance artist, Michael J. Love, also discusses tap's relationship to African American history. Tap dance, he explains, is a relic of Black enslavement—an

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artform that was born out of the need for survival. This history constantly ruptures through the present—affecting and influencing Love’s personal practice as a performer and scholar of tap.

The exhibition presents dance as a form of transmission—the passing of knowledge, memory, and spirit, from one body to another. McClodden approaches the study of choreography and movement as central to the understanding of Black conceptual thought and African diasporic history. She achieves this through visual language—tracing the shadows of past onto the present.

As people began to wander into the gallery on opening night, the dance floors appeared still and untouched. By the end of the evening, I could make out the faint traces of footsteps marking their surfaces. They were multidirectional and flowing—intersecting at different moments of space and time. In order to trace something that cannot be seen—only felt—one must know what to feel for, and how to recognize that which is only an “implied presence.”

McClodden’s exhibition urges audiences to sense that implication through movement—to study it as a dance.