ARTnews

TIONA NEKKIA MCCLODDEN AND GENEVIEVE HYACINTHE ON BLACK ATLANTIC RELIGION AND CONTEMPORARY ART

Tiona Nekkia McClodden, Genevieve Hyacinthe

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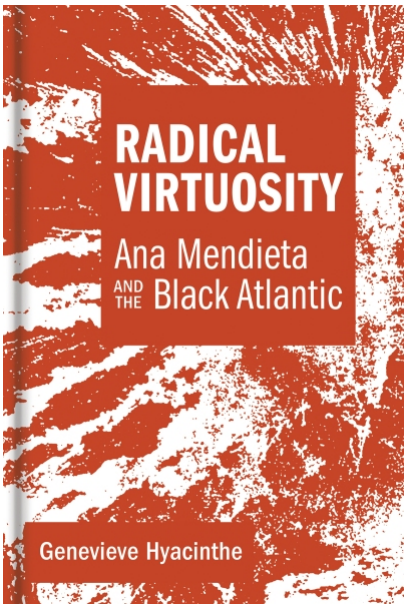
View of McClodden's *The Brad Johnson Tape, X-On Subjugation*, 2017, in the group exhibition "Speech/Acts" at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia.PHOTO CONSTANCE MENSH.

Tiona Nekkia McClodden is both an artist and a Santería priestess. Also known as La Regla Lucumí, this Afro-Caribbean religion is, like Haitian Vodou, an amalgamation of Roman Catholicism and Ifa, the religion of the Yoruba people in West Africa. McClodden is American, and much of her work centers around being dispossessed of,

and later reclaiming, her religious heritage. Art historian Genevieve Hyacinthe's recent book, *Radical Virtuosity: **Ana Mendieta** and the Black Atlantic*(2019), details how a related sense of dispossession colors the work of Cuban artist Ana Mendieta. Mendieta fled Cuba at the age of twelve, and grew up in foster care in the United States. Hyacinthe connects Mendieta's work to that of other artists of the Black Atlantic, a term that refers to the distinct, hybrid culture that emerged as a result of the forced migration of Black people during the slave trade, incorporating African, American, British, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and Caribbean traditions. Mendieta was raised Catholic, though in her book, Hyacinthe argues that Mendieta reimagined subtle dynamics of Santería/Lucumí like *serio* (the practice of focused repetition and thinking through the body) in her famous performance photo series "Silueta" (1973–85). In Iowa and Mexico, Mendieta imprinted the silhouette of her body into the earth or lay naked on rocky surfaces, covered with materials such as flowers, sticks, and dirt. Below, McClodden and Hyacinthe discuss diasporic art and religion, and the role *serio* plays in their respective practices.

TIONA NEKKIA McCLODDEN Mark Godfrey, a curator at the Tate, recommended your book to me during a studio visit. He said the book matched the way I was thinking about my work.



GENEVIEVE HYACINTHE I wanted that book to be both poetic and political, like Mendieta's practice. Tell me about *I prayed to the wrong god for you* [2019], your video installation in the most recent Whitney Biennial, which I think resonates with some of the energies in *Radical Virtuosity*. I'm curious about why you decided to use Celia Cruz's song "Plegaria a Changó" as the soundtrack for the trailer.

McCLODDEN I make trailers for all my works, whether they're sculptures or films. But I was drawn to "Plegaria a Changó" because it has this mysterious dual ownership: some associate it with Celia Cruz [1925—2003], others, with Merceditas Valdés [1922—1996]. When people listen to Orisha music, we don't actually know who the author is. "Plegaria a Changó" [Prayer to Shango] captured the diasporic feel I was looking for: it has this African tempo, and this Cuban swing.

HYACINTHE It looks like you shot the piece mostly in Ibadan, Nigeria, and in the United States.

McCLODDEN Yes, in Ibadan, in Philly, in Maine while in residence at Skowhegan, and in Upstate New York. That's where the horse in the video lived; his name is Carl. He's a retired thoroughbred.

Still from McClodden's *I prayed to the wrong god for you*, 2019, six-channel color HD video installed alongside twelve objects.

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HYACINTHE Why were you drawn to Carl?

McCLODDEN I was referencing the horse ridden by the [thunder] deity, Shango. I restored an old horse bridle and presented it to him. I've always found horses pretty frightening, so being near one while filming was intense.

HYACINTHE When I saw the horse in the video, I kept thinking about the Houngans, the Haitian Vodou priests who ride horses. As early as the fifteenth century, Tellem people, who lived in Mali, made beautiful sculptures of human bodies melting into the bodies of horses, suggesting that they are one. You see the unified horse and rider in sculptures throughout West Africa and in Haiti. In Haitian Vodou, they say that when *lwa*—Vodou deities—come into a person, they are mounting the person.

McCLODDEN When the horse was wearing my bridal, he seemed to fall into a state of possession: he was looking at me, and nothing else. This was the most spiritually correct work I've done, in the sense that it really affirmed a lot of the teachings I've received over the years as part of my spiritual practice. I would complete a self-imposed task, or a directed one, and then something lovely and affirming would present itself. Most of my prior artwork had a more legible endpoint. With this piece, I had to sense when it was done.

HYACINTHE Rituals are often oversimplified in contemporary art discourse. And there are certainly aspects that are difficult to put into words, or that you don't want to

disclose. This tension between concealment and revelation has historically been a part of African art-making. So, you probably have to make judgment calls, even in this conversation, about what you want to disclose, and how accessible, legible, or clear you want to be. How do you approach bringing this refined ritual knowledge that you've carefully cultivated to audiences?

Still from McClodden's *I prayed to the wrong god for you*, 2019, six-channel color HD video installed alongside twelve objects.

McCLODDEN I feel very affirmed, and my goal is to be as honest as possible. Non-practitioners looking at this particular work probably don't know what they're looking at. I care the most that my spiritual community can access and understand the work. It's not a performance. It's a document.

HYACINTHE I found the nonlinear structure of *I prayed to the wrong god for you* to be a very truthful way to narrate diaspora. As Michelle Wright notes in her book *Physics of Blackness* [2015], the cultural flows around and through the Black Atlantic are assemblage-like, not easily mapped, and multidirectional.

McCLODDEN And syncretism is at the core. Many people have stereotypical views of religious people, and collapse all religions into a monolith. As a Black queer woman interweaving faith-based and contemporary art practices from a diasporic perspective, I feel it is important to disrupt this flattened image.

HYACINTHE And queer priests and priestesses have historically been important contributors to Black Atlantic religious practice. Also, many Orisha [deities] have liminal gender expressions.

Can we discuss queerness, and also symbolism in your work? For instance, in the film, I saw Ogun's symbol: iron. I know that you're a priestess of Ogun [metal deity].

Dogon or Tellem equestrian figure, ca. 1500–1900, wood and sacrificial material, 13 ⅞ by 2 ½ by 4 ¾ in.COURTESY ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO.

McCLODDEN Actually, I was interested in Shango's and Ogun's relationship, which is extraordinarily hostile. Both use iron; Shango also uses wood. Both have relationships with Oshun. [One day, Ogun gets angry and retreats to the forest. Because he rules modern civilization, machines and cities begin to break down in his absence.] Oshun [deity of the river and sensuality] pulls Ogun out of the forest by rubbing honey on his mouth. But ultimately, Oshun leaves Ogun because he is too removed from the world and always working. Then, Oshun becomes attracted to Shango's machismo energy and worldly ways. Oya [deity of lightning and wind] also has a relationship with Ogun.

HYACINTHE Some say that Oya has both masculine and feminine energy. I remember hearing a story about how Shango disguises himself by wearing Oya's clothing and styling his hair with her plaits to outmaneuver his captors. Yet Oya is also described as being a really skilled combatant, a quality stereotypically associated with masculinity. Like Shango and Ogun, Oya is expert at brandishing an iron machete.

McCLODDEN Oya is my mother Orisha; I've heard her described as "the woman who puts on pants and grows a beard to go to war."

HYACINTHE I'm curious about how you approached bringing all of this to the Whitney.

McCLODDEN I never thought I'd be one of the artists that they'd include in the Whitney Biennial. I was happy, but also overwhelmed by what it means to participate in a biennial of "American" art. One formal way I navigated legibility was arranging the six channels on monitors and projectors facing outward in a triangle, refusing to show them all at once. You had to walk around the piece.

HYACINTHE The idea of having to walk around the work reminds me of the ritual practice of circumnavigating a center point. In Vodou, devotees walk around a central pillar called the *potomitan* to spark a spiritual connection. I could see how asking your viewers to walk around the piece could potentially heighten their meditative state.

McCLODDEN I was thinking about the *festas* I attended in Brazil, where Candomblé [Afro-Brazilian religion, a syncretism of Ifa and Roman Catholicism] practitioners continuously walk around a pole before they fall into a state of possession. I was looking at that large structure members of the Muslim community circle around when making Hajj in Mecca. I was also thinking about [the concept of] the periphery, and about how everyone will get their own experience of the film based on where they stand and when their eyes catch whichever channel.

HYACINTHE So what is "wrong?" The title is *I prayed to the wrong god for you*.

McCLODDEN The work debuted in 2019, four hundred years after enslaved Africans arrived on this continent. My father was very Christian. When I was younger, he gave me a hard time for not believing in the Christian God. I'm not the only person who experienced this kind of manipulation as a kid. The video is a response to being dispossessed of my religious heritage at an early age. I lost friends when I went through my initiation and *Iyawó* [novice] period. I knew that people fear African diasporic religion. Even now, it's a rare opportunity to talk to someone in the contemporary art world like you, who gets my work and references.

HYACINTHE I certainly found your work very familiar.

McCLODDEN I wanted to talk to you about how *serio* relates to your practice. For your book, you reperformed Mendieta's works at several original sites. How did it feel to cross from just reading Mendieta's work, to thinking about your own body?

HYACINTHE I began learning African and Haitian dance at the same time that I started my PhD program. I started going to West Africa to dance, drum, and study art. And I wanted to explore bodily engagement as a method for critical research. So when

I visited the Mexican Zapotec burial site where Mendieta made her first "Silueta," *Imágen de Yágul*[1973], I had already been practicing *árbitra* [deep witnessing] and *serio* for a long time.

Though I'd seen the *Imágen de Yágul* photograph so many times, when I laid down in a tomb like the one Mendieta lay in, I suddenly did not know what to do with my body. I felt damp and claustrophobic, and I was worried about getting caught by the groundskeepers. So I simply let my body go into Savasana [the yoga "corpse pose"]. My colleague Carmelita Diaz placed a blanket of flowers over my body and took photos of me. When I saw the images, I realized I hadn't held my body correctly. Mendieta's arms were tightly drawn against her torso, and her feet, ankles, and legs were zipped together. But my body was letting itself go into the earth. Mendieta was not a figure of entropy, as she is often described. Instead, she was a figure of endurance. Perhaps she was situating her body to conduct ancestral and earthen energies. I didn't realize that until I felt it for myself.

View of McClodden's *The Brad Johnson Tape, X-On Subjugation*, 2017, in the group exhibition "Speech/Acts" at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia.PHOTO CONSTANCE MENSH.

McCLODDEN *Serio* is how I approach both my spiritual and artistic practices, especially as I started to involve my own body in my art work, which I first did for my video *The Brad Johnson Tape* [2017]. I think of that work as my haptic notes for what

ultimately became the leather paintings in my first gallery show, “Hold on, let me take the safety off,” at Company Gallery in New York in 2019.

Brad Johnson [1952-2011] was a poet who died of AIDs-related complications. He wrote about the deterioration of his mind as well as his body. I wanted to think about the body as a poem. Reading his poems felt so physical to me. I started reading what he was reading, to get a sense of where he was coming from. This led me to Kazimierz Twardowski, a philosopher who writes about the concept of positive disintegration: a personality theory that posits tension and anxiety as essential for growth.

While I was making this work, I was also dealing with a ton of anxiety in response to what was and is happening to me and other to Black folks around me.

HYACINTHE I often feel this too…

McCLODDEN I wanted to get closer to my anxiety, and to destroy it over and over again. I didn’t want to just wait for the violence to come, I wanted to confront it. So every day, for thirty days, I willfully endured scary shit. My goal was to grab this unnamable violence by its neck, pull it very close to my face, and tell it “you have no place here.”

—Moderated by Emily Watlington