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CRITIC'S PICK

Her Art Comes Without Trigger Warnings

Tiona Nekkia McClodden's new show is a multidimensional meditation on guns as weapons and as sources for her work.



View of Tiona Nekkia McClodden's show "Mask / Conceal / Carry." Left, "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. At right, an image from the video "Precision, in Spite of a Threatening Figure," 2022. via 52 Walker, New York

By **Roberta Smith**

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In the last three years, Tiona Nekkia McClodden has emerged as one of the most singular artists of our aesthetically rich, free-range time. She

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announced her presence with a standout piece in the 2019 Whitney Biennial — which received its [Bucksbaum Award](#) — and has continued her rise with two impressive gallery solos, one at Company, a gallery on the Lower East Side in late 2019, and another currently at 52 Walker Street in TriBeCa.

Like any true artist, McClodden’s work derives from the complex, multifaceted nature of her identity, who she is and has become: a Black woman, a lesbian drawn to weight training and BDSM play, a priestess of Santeria. She studied film in the early 2000s, becoming known as an underground filmmaker before turning to video installation and sculpture.

McClodden’s works are meticulously grounded in their physical nature, evidenced by the way she always enumerates their material components. This precision is exemplified by the 120-word list of objects and materials comprising her 2017 installation [“Brad Johnson, Tape X — on Subjugation,”](#) at the Museum of Modern Art. She is clearly not sympathetic to such vagueness as “mixed media.”

At times these entries convey a startling tenderness and intimacy, as they do in [“Mask / Conceal / Carry,”](#) her current exhibition at 52 Walker — a multidimensional meditation on guns. Here a leather cast of the small oblong magazine of an AR15 assault rifle is described as made of “leather with black dye, Saphir shoe polish, and spit.” Unlike anything else at 52 Walker these materials nod to her Company exhibition, where they figured in nearly every piece.

The Company show was one of the best shows by an emerging artist I’d ever seen. Its array of black leather objects against stark white walls crackled with intersecting ideas and references to different subcultures and fetishizations — from BDSM to modern art — that only increased as you looked.

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“Fig. V. AR15 Magazine Leather,” 2022, a small relief in “leather with black dye, Saphir shoe polish, and spit.” via Tiona Nekkia McClodden and 52 Walker, New York

The objects included biker jackets, lineman harnesses, an English saddle — all readymades darkened and unified by the added shoe polish. A Marcel Breuer Wassily chair (1925-26), emblematic of high modernism, made us see the rectangles of leather on the walls as abstract paintings, evoking [Kazimir Malevich's](#) famous black squares liberated from their white backgrounds. The mind skittered along these allusions linking skin, blackness, modernism, death, and the empowerment of a constructed persona. In retrospect, the Company show's title, “Hold on, let me take the safety off,” pointed directly to “Mask / Conceal / Carry.”

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Installation view of McClodden's 2019 show at Company Gallery: black leather unified with black shoe polish. via Tiona Nekkia McClodden and Company Gallery, New York

The 52 Walker show lacks the immediate clarity and black-against-white sparkle of its predecessor. In contrast it dwells in an almost aqueous blue twilight, but it bites off more. Combining painting, sculpture, relief, video, performance and language it creates a portrait of the artist and her art within a larger view of American life.

It begins with a printed statement on the wall — an artwork titled “I Don’t Believe in Trigger Warnings Anymore,” with which McClodden tersely dismisses the notion that anyone is responsible for anyone else’s sense of safety in artistic realms.

And it unfolds as an extended demonstration of how McClodden takes care of herself — what she does to feel safe — and how these habits have moved from her life into her art, coming to center on guns.

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This means guns as omnipresent in American society, as alternately threat and protection. It means guns as objects whose parts and processes can yield artworks, and a similar focus on the rituals surrounding both their safe use and their fetishization, namely the firing range. Prominent among these rituals is “dry firing” — digitally analyzed target practice without ammunition.



“A Study in Qualification 89.9 AR15 / 97.6 AR15 / 98.1 AR15 / 95.9 22mm / 92.9 AR” (2022): five squiggles from five bullet-free shots, on view at 52 Walker. via Tiona Nekkia McClodden and 52 Walker, New York

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“Fig. VIII. W 22mm” (2022), Black Kydex. via Tiona Nekkia McClodden and 52 Walker, New York

McClodden converts handguns and parts of larger guns into reliefs using a plastic called Kydex that records but also softens and abstracts each object’s form. Parts of larger guns cast in bronze with black patina yield alluring but overly mysterious sculptures on pedestals. Amid them is an anomalous scene-stealer: a gorgeous masked helmet of chain mail, made in silver, gold and stainless steel thread (and “sweat,” the checklist says). Its long title expresses an empowering anger while also recalling the magical Tarnhelm of Wagner’s “Ring,” which gave its wearer the power of invisibility. (The chain mail helmet also conjures the Crusades, the beginning of Western colonialism.)

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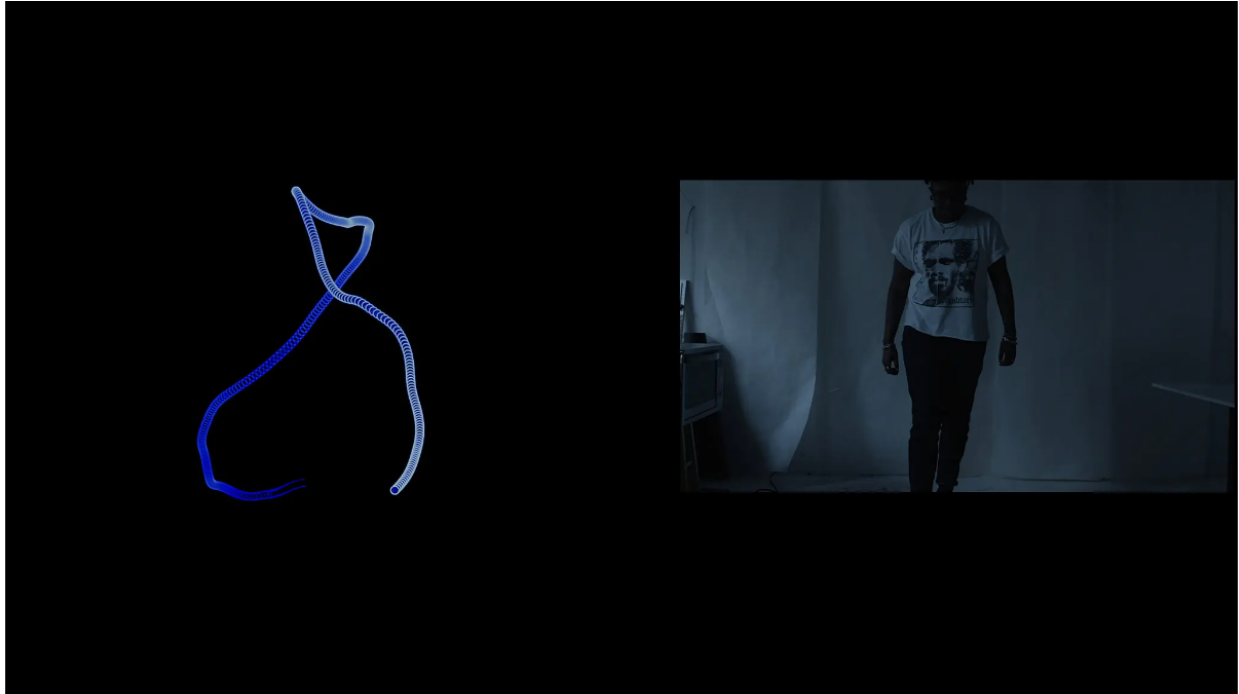
Dry firing target practice results in the seven seemingly abstract paintings here; a laser and computer program translate the infinitesimal movements of a shooter's hand into jumpy Twomblyesque scribbles. McClodden has transferred the records of her practice sessions to canvas, evoking modern art (specifically automatism) while likening the shooter's skills to the painter's.

McClodden's videos add crucial life, light, shifting sounds and music to the show. "Cuts a Dark Figure ..." centers on an enlarged view of the toaster oven in which the artist heats the Kydex for use, but memorably resembles a life-size coffin or sarcophagus. In the two-channel "To Wend One's Way...", McClodden is seen alone in her studio, walking but getting nowhere — Naumanesque activity, pursued on a treadmill it seems. She looks buff and assured in her signature white T-shirt and bluejeans, occasionally shifting a pistol in her waistband, nonchalantly at ease. On the work's second screen her movements, again recorded by computerized lasers, register as looping, twisting, animated lines suggestive of abstract film.



In "Cuts a Dark Figure ..." (2022), a toaster oven heating Kydex evokes an occupied sarcophagus. via Tiona Nekkia McClodden and 52 Walker, New York

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A two-channel video “To Wend One’s Way ...” (2022) features McClodden walking in her studio next to a computerized tracing of her movements. via Tiona Nekkia McClodden and 52 Walker, New York

In the video “Precision, in Spite of a Threatening Figure,” the scribbles appear again, this time on photographs of people aiming guns in our direction, some from cars, the aisles of liquor stores or fictive hostage situations, others against blank backgrounds. These random images — creepily available online and used as targets in police and military training — are mostly of white people who frequently seem lost, maybe delusional. Gathered by McClodden into art, they accidentally join a tradition that includes photographs of Americans by Walker Evans, Robert Frank and Diane Arbus, and they can make you fear for this country.

Tiona Nekkia McClodden: Mask/ Conceal / Carry

Through Oct. 8, 52 Walker, 52 Walker Street, Manhattan ([\(212\) 727-1961](tel:2127271961); 52walker.com).