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# The Philly Bop gets new life in New York

*Artist Tiona Nekkia McClodden focuses on a dance born from the racism of 'American Bandstand'*



From *The Trace of An Implied Presence*, a portrait of Audrey (left) and June Donaldson (right), who hold Philly Bop classes two and three times a week. Tiona Nekkia McClodden

By Candice Thompson

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In an ambitious new exhibition at The Shed in Manhattan, artist Tiona Nekkia McClodden presents a survey of contemporary Black dance, including a large-scale video portrait of Audrey and June Donaldson, a married couple who are prominent teachers of a dance that was once central to social life in Black Philadelphia: the [Philly Bop](#).

A form of swing dance that evolved from the Lindy Hop, the Philly Bop emerged in the 1950s alongside Dick Clark's *American Bandstand*, one of the most popular television

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shows in the country, which was filmed in the city. But *Bandstand*'s discriminatory admission policies created a predominantly white show, forcing Black teenagers to find their own spaces. That led to an evolution in style that was distinct from what white dancers were doing.

McClodden originally learned the dance for a video project she did in 2018. Her new show, [\*The Trace of an Implied Presence\*](#), focuses more intimately on the Donaldsons as well as three other artists representative of Black dance today: tap dancer Michael J. Love; Kim Grier-Martinez, director of the modern-based Rod Rodgers Dance Company; and experimental dance artist Leslie Cuyjet.

McClodden said this survey is the hardest thing she has worked on in a while. Besides the social distancing precautions she took to ensure safe shoots with the artists, she was the sole camera operator and edited the hundreds of hours of footage herself.

“Dance is a very unstable thing to try to document,” McClodden said. “A trace suggests something that is left, but also suggests movement. The opportunity here was to create these portraits in a space where you’re able to hear the voices of the dancers talk and you’re able to see them dance.”

By any measure, McClodden is having a moment. With three exhibitions in New York – [\*MASK / CONCEAL / CARRY\*](#) at the 52 Walker gallery in Tribeca, [\*The Brad Johnson Tape, X – On Subjugation\*](#) at the Museum of Modern Art, and this work at The Shed – the 41-year-old, Philadelphia-based artist is gaining critical acclaim.

McClodden’s roots in filmmaking are apparent in the craft of her video installations, which also include sculpture and painting. Through a partnership with Nike, McClodden fabricated four special dance floors in front of the screens at The Shed. Wall text invites viewers to use the floor and document themselves dancing.

Andscape caught up with McClodden to talk about her long fascination and personal relationship with the Philly Bop.

*This conversation has been edited for clarity and length.*

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Tiona Nekkia McClodden's *The Trace of an Implied Presence* is an exhibition at The Shed in Manhattan  
TIONA NEKKIA MCCLODDEN

### **Did you seek out the Philly Bop or did the Philly Bop find you?**

I say it kind of found me, by accident. I happened to be on Germantown Avenue and I was going by [the venue] Treasures. I saw all these people dressed so nicely and they were going in and out of a banquet hall and it just seemed like a secret. I walked in and saw they were dancing in a way that was so particular, like they were dancing *something*. I asked and they told me, 'Oh, this is the night when people are doing the Bop.'

When you go in, there's this in-between area where you can see a beautiful wall of all these flyers for people to come and do the Bop or old school nights – all these classes. I decided that I wanted to learn the Bop after I found that it was the official dance of Philadelphia. Then I wanted not only to learn the dance, but I wanted to do a project on it. I was immediately struck by the fact that this was something that was somewhat stealth.

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## **What do you mean by stealth?**

The space that it takes place in doesn't signal that that thing is happening there. I think it's an architecture thing. It's also an age thing. These dances or these gatherings happen at nontraditional spaces. I went to a cabaret that was at a skate rink. I went to a cabaret that was at an older people's home in the auditorium room. They happen at these places that are informal spaces that can be a lot of different things. And they're just extraordinarily organized, but they're one-night oriented. That's the stealthness and it kind of evades an easily decipherable, legible, entry point, which I like.

## **What was the learning process like?**

*The Philly Bop* is a project I did earlier, so I learned the Bop in 2018. I documented 15 people who are core to the scene. And despite this, I just posted a video on my Instagram that shows me looking rusty!

I went to a class weekly for about a month and a half to learn. And then eventually, the way that you get it is you have to go to the actual cabarets.

I learned the dance so that I could properly film the dance – it became very clear that there was something you almost needed to understand in your own body, even if you weren't good, to help you as someone with a camera on the dance floor.

## **The dance is very smooth.**

It's so smooth. Oh, my gosh. That's what I love, love, love about the dance and what makes it so difficult to read until you have someone break it down. They are very much on the count, they're doing like the 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, but the way they move they almost like sometimes will skip the step, but they're still doing the step.

## **Like speaking a language where a sound drops off the end of a word.**

Yeah. That's why I think it's one of the more fascinating, beautiful representations of Black culture. When I see people dance, it's almost like I am brought back to this space of 'I thought I knew this thing, but I had no idea.'

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## **Do you see how Philly is embodied in the style?**

Absolutely. This is why I moved here and why I've lived here. I came to Philly for the very thing that I think I can see within the Bop, which is a particular confidence, a smoothness, and a particular awareness of self and body in space that Black people hold here that's very, very different from how I grew up in South Carolina. When I was growing up in the '80s and '90s, there was a different way you had to hold your body, a way that older Black people definitely carried themselves – it goes into a more respectability politics-type of thing in the South, whereas here, you still have that but it's more like swagger.

Then there's history. When it comes to any kind of Black cultural engagement, there is such a definitive resistance here. And so understanding how the Bop came to be on *American Bandstand* and how the Bop just in general was existing as this kind of device to tell somebody whether or not they had a hit through music. And then to have Black people being turned away.

Black people said, 'Hey, we're gonna go and we're gonna have these parties, these cabarets in these garages, churches, buildings,' whatever. And then they funk'd it up. It was saying we're gonna Bop, but we're gonna make it something that is of the culture that is, quite frankly, Black. After a while nobody wanted to go to the *Bandstand* because now they had established spaces.

Philly's good for that. I tell people: Philly will figure it out.

## **When the dance was modified in these separate parties and cabarets, is that where the smoothness emerged?**

Yeah. When I think of white people Bopping [on *American Bandstand*], I think of a lot of bouncing.

Otis Givens was one of the first Black people to dance on *Bandstand* in the '50s. He talked about what happens with your body when it changes into a space that's around your people. You don't have to mimic. Bop is a peripheral dance, you have your partner



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and you're also aware of everyone around you.

So if you watch a Bop, there's definitely these exceptional people who have their own style, but people also adjust their style because they are interested in the room and what they're seeing peripherally. I think that the Boppers who were maybe, dare I say, the token Blacks who were able to be chosen and dance [on *American Bandstand*], some of them had to maybe fall in line. But when they got around their own folks, then things relaxed.

**I witnessed this beautiful moment at the opening of the show where I was watching footage of Audrey and June dancing and realized the couple watching next to me was Audrey and June. Tell me about your relationship with them.**

Audrey and June are the ones that really made me want to do a good job. I wanted to make sure that they were highlighted for all that they have done because when you are an artist like me, sometimes people think, oh, you discovered it [the Bop] and I'm like, hell, no, I didn't discover anything.

Audrey and June will always be centered in my project as the keepers of how Bop is really moving in terms of organization in the city. They keep an impressive [calendar](#) that can tell you wherever you want to go dance every night of the week, they make flyers for these parties, and they do classes two to three times a week.

The first person that asked me for a dance at a cabaret was June. So my relationship with them is very special.

**With its practitioners skewing older, how do you keep a social dance like Philly Bop from disappearing?**

One of the reasons I decided that it should be something that I documented was because of that risk. There's young people who know it because they learned it from their parents and it's kind of like a rite of passage to be able to Bop with a grandma or auntie or whatever, but they're not partying like that.

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I was eager to try to see if I could invoke an intergenerational dialogue with this project. Opening night [at The Shed], people started trying to learn from the video and then other people got up on the floor to show them. It was an immediate transfer that helps it have an existence in a certain way, but it is still at risk.



MARIA BARANOVA/THE SHED

Married couple Audrey (left) and June Donaldson (right) are prominent teachers of the Philly Bop, a dance that was once central to social life in Black Philadelphia.

## **You had special dance floors made for each video installation. What makes the Philly Bop floor unique?**

All the floors in the space are sprung. For the Philly Bop, it is an Ashwood board that has a finish I selected at Audrey and June's request. They need a particular floor with a smoothness that has an ability to allow them to slide with the shoes that they wear but not too smooth where you can slip and fall. It will probably be the most worn floor just because it will hold the most people at the same time who are trying something. And so therefore, there will be a particular power and an energy left on that floor.