

Tiona Nekkia McClodden

Kunsthalle
Basel

26.05.2023
– 13.08.2023

THE POETICS OF BEAUTY WILL INEVITABLY
RESORT TO THE MOST BASE PLEADINGS
AND OTHER WILES IN ORDER TO SECURE ITS
RELEASE

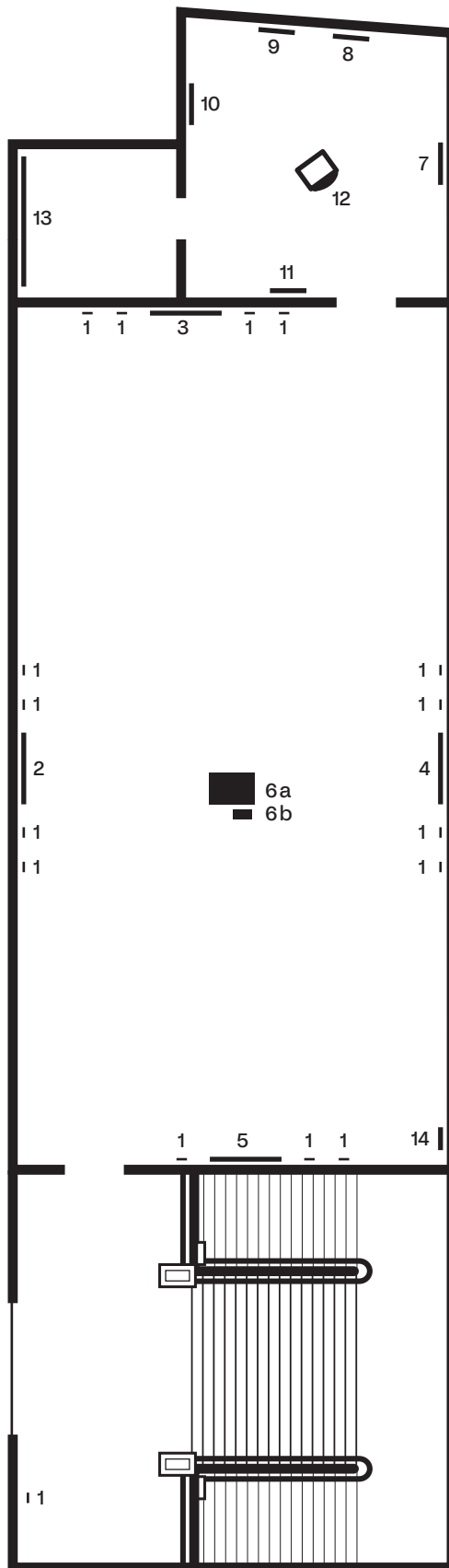
Take a breath. Hold it in. Exhale. Do it again. Again. And again. Suddenly, your body's most basic act, which you probably rarely think about—although each of us typically performs it twenty-two thousand times per day—becomes conscious, evident, even pressing. We live—or die—through breath. **EN**

Tiona Nekkia McClodden's project on view here initially developed from a less existential path of inquiry. For many years, the US-American artist has been fascinated with choke valves—devices built into various kinds of machinery that restrict air flow, either automated or operated manually. She keeps a range of palm-size choke valves in her studio, where they are literal material to think through the device's semantics, functionality, and aesthetic dimensions. She sees beauty even in their stark utility. The artist has long free-associated them with the much larger metal contraptions used in the livestock industry known as cattle head gates. When these gates close around the neck of a bovine, they constrain its head, allowing handlers or veterinarians easier access to administer medication, to monitor well-being, or, conversely, to kill. Not quite the same as a choke valve, but something about how those gates close around a neck and throat brings the two devices together for McClodden.

For her very first institutional solo exhibition, McClodden has assembled a series of artworks born from industrial cattle head gates. Each of these detachable frontal portions of a cattle chute bears a central opening, sometimes in-built with lateral angled bends. Such indentations create a contoured accommodation for a neck. The artist is most interested what she sees as its "point of mercy": a place of gentleness in an otherwise brutal mechanism. To turn them into artworks, McClodden had them sand-blasted so as to be stripped of their logos, their "Made in America" declarations, and indeed all of their industrially slickified surfaces. She then primed them with black wax and hand-painted them so that they give off an absorbingly dark, decidedly flat, matte blackness. She considers each a painting, and one can detect the marks of her brush. Yet: even lifted off the ground and now fixed to the wall at the standard height of a painting, they clearly exceed mere painting. Part modified readymade, part minimalist object, part tool for the disciplining of a life, they emit an inexplicable violence.

In the center of the first room sits a metal stand of the sort that usually accompanies a head gate. It, too, is gunmetal black, yet its form is less elaborate, and its function less evident than the wall works. Sitting upon it, a store-bought

13 *DOUBLE BIND*, 2023
Video, color, sound
28 min 43 sec



7 *NEVER LET ME GO / I. such delicacy*, 2023
Black jute rope, leather,
Saphir shoe polish
122 × 61 × 5 cm

10 *NEVER LET ME GO / II. to refrain*, 2023
Black jute rope, leather,
Saphir shoe polish
122 × 61 × 5 cm

8 *NEVER LET ME GO / IV. this relation at first filled*, 2023
Black jute rope, leather,
Saphir shoe polish
122 × 61 × 5 cm

11 *NEVER LET ME GO / III. a visage*, 2023
Black cotton rope,
leather, Saphir shoe polish
122 × 61 × 5 cm

9 *NEVER LET ME GO / V. irrevocable*, 2023
Black jute rope, leather,
Saphir shoe polish
122 × 61 × 5 cm

12 *DIRE/RETENUE*, 2023
Video, B/W, sound
10 min 57 sec

2 *A MERCY II*, 2023
Steel, black paint,
shoe polish
183 × 117 × 51 cm

6a *HEAD LOSS*, 2023
Steel, black paint,
shoe polish
198 × 81 × 51 cm

3 *A MERCY IV*, 2023
Steel, black paint,
shoe polish
185 × 112 × 46 cm

6b *APNEA*, 2023
Air compressor,
timed release
Approx. 59 × 55 × 36 cm

4 *A MERCY III*, 2023
Steel, black paint,
shoe polish
178 × 137 × 51 cm

14 *MIA_10 [Basel]*, 2023
Razor blade
1.91 × 3.81 cm

5 *A MERCY I*, 2023
Steel, black paint,
shoe polish
196 × 158 × 25 cm

1 *THRASHER [I-XVI]*, 2023
Hand-cut leather, hand-embossed, black dye
16 works, various dimensions

PERFORMANCE

14.06.2023, 8–8:30 p.m.

A MOMENT OF INATTENTION, 2023

Performance

Conceived and choreographed by Tiona Nekkia McClodden

Performers: Danielle Deadwyler, Tiona Nekkia McClodden

Approx. 20 min

Hyundai-brand “extra silent” air compressor rigged with a choke valve specially made by the artist releases air seven times an hour—the exact number of times McClodden herself stops breathing each night due to sleep apnea. Here, an anonymous, industrial thing and a personal medical biography intertwine, manifest in the hiss of seeping air, accompanied by the compressor engine’s occasional eerie percussion.

All around this, interspersed between the head gates along the exhibition’s walls, dangle a multitude of leather straps, each embossed with a line of text. “A SINGLE MOMENT OF INATTENTION AND I FORGET TO BREATHE,” reads one of the lines. McClodden manually made the straps using the same labor- and time-intensive dyeing and bootstrap-polishing treatment as in the leather paintings in the room to come. The belts are made to be strapped at various pressure points across a human torso, just under the breast. They will be worn by the artist and another performer at a public event on Wednesday, June 14, 2023, at 8 p.m. A progressive layering of the straps forms part of the choreography: each addition acts as a new regulation of posture and an escalating obstruction to the wearer’s capacity to breathe, let alone their ability to recite the words embossed on the straps they wear. With each tightening, the volume of their spoken words is quelled until merely a whisper remains. This recitation is a lament of vulnerability—an elegy to a threatened life.

In the next room hang five leather paintings, each crisscrossed with a variant of Japanese rope bondage as if they, too, are bodies. To make the paintings, McClodden took raw cowhides, colored them with various dyes, conditioned them to bring out the skin’s texture, and further polished them to achieve a fine, lustrous finish. From a distance, the leather surfaces appear black. But up close, they reveal shades of blue and red shimmering beneath their darkened surfaces. For these works, McClodden favors a shoeshine technique, partly because it requires visitors to move in a gesture not unlike what actual shoeshiners employ—a kind of swaying from side to side to catch reflections in the shoes or boots being polished. The artist deploys various levels of shine, from a dull luster to a high gloss, then wraps them with black rope according to the conventions of *kinbaku-bi* (literally “the beauty of tight binding”). The technique first emerged in Japan as a method of restraining captives and a form of torture, but then fed into several forms of erotic bondage popularized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And while McClodden seems to treat her paintings

like bodies, the permanence of her bondage does something impossible on living flesh: when *kinbaku-bi* is practiced on a person, there is a time frame to respect before it inflicts bruises or cuts off circulation.

Like a parliament of (constrained) bodies, the paintings surround a central monitor that showcases *DIRE/RETENUE* (Say/ Withholding), a black-and-white video transferred from VHS showing the artist’s torso entirely bound by leather straps, her chest heaving in an attempt to breathe. It connects to the video in the next room, *DOUBLE BIND*, and, one might even imagine, to Andy Warhol’s iconic 1964 anti-film *Sleep*. Silent, black and white, and more than five hours long, *Sleep* features Warhol’s lover, the poet John Giorno, without a hint of narrative drama or climax. Giorno simply slumbers while we look on. There is something of the same resolute lack of spectacle in McClodden’s *DOUBLE BIND*, which similarly points a camera at a sleeper, although it is the artist herself in this case. Her face is covered with a mask connected to a medical device to counter her obstructive sleep apnea. One hears ambient sounds from a nearby window and the noise of the device itself, whose steady pumping allows the artist to slumber without risk of asphyxiation. If you stay with the video long enough, you might notice that about twenty minutes in, McClodden struggles for breath, and the machine attached to her ramps up its delivery of air. But the “event” feels entirely uneventful, such that watching it feels mostly like a creepy act of surveillance: we can see her struggle for air, whereas, in her sleep, she is oblivious to it (even if her body isn’t). Lying a bit like a Renaissance rendition of a dead Christ, but medically aided and entirely contemporary, the sleeping figure connects to the questions of life and death, breath and mercy, bodily vulnerability and survival, that permeate the exhibition.

There is a strange poetry and a tremor of violence to this assembly of artworks. In times of overwhelming brutality—capitalist excess, environmental crises, structural violence, systemic racism—McClodden’s focus on the flow of air is anything but benign. Hers is a quiet unraveling of our cruel present with its differing forms of everyday domination, constraint, and breaches of consent. To leave the exhibition from its last room, the artist knows, visitors must retrace their steps, passing from the compact back room into a slightly larger space, and then into the deliberately spare expanse of the main gallery, like a contracted lung expanding. Or like a choke valve holding, then exhaling, air.

Tiona Nekkia McClodden was born in 1981 in Blytheville, AR, US; she lives and works in Philadelphia, PA, US.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a publication jointly published by Kunsthalle Basel and Saint Laurent, available at the end of summer 2023.

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SAINT LAURENT

GUIDED TOURS THROUGH THE EXHIBITION

Public guided tours on every first Sunday of the month in German

04.06.2023, Sunday, 3 p.m.

02.07.2023, Sunday, 3 p.m.

06.08.2023, Sunday, 3 p.m.

Guided tour by curator Elena Filipovic in English

25.06.2023, Sunday, 3 p.m.

Registration at kunstvermittlung@kunsthallebasel.ch

MEDIATION AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Mal•Mal–Fashion Drawing, in German and English

31.05.2023, Wednesday, 6–8 p.m.

Draw from a live model in the current exhibition; material will be provided.

Talk to Me, in German and English

14.–18.06.2023, Wednesday–Sunday

Visitors can learn more about the exhibitions in personal conversations.

Kunsthalle Basel Night, free entry

14.06.2023, Wednesday, 7–10 p.m.

From 8–8:30 p.m., premiere of Tiona Nekkia McClodden's performance *A MOMENT OF INATTENTION*. Attendance is limited, no reservations possible, and no admission after the performance has begun; please arrive on time.

Kunsthalle ohne Schwellen, in German

31.07.–13.08.2023

In the half-day workshops for people with disabilities, participants explore the current exhibitions and try out different forms of artistic expression with a final presentation.

Mittwoch-Matinée, in German

02.08.2023, Wednesday, 10 a.m.–noon

As part of the Museen Basel event series, the current exhibitions will be explored and discussed collectively; participation 10 CHF.

EXTERNAL EVENT INFORMATION

Art Basel Conversations: *From Constraint to Ecstasy*, in English

16.06.2023, Friday, 1–2 p.m.

Panel discussion with Tiona Nekkia McClodden and P. Staff, moderated by Elena Filipovic, at Art Basel, Messeplatz 10, Hall 1, ground floor, free entry

In the Kunsthalle Basel library, you will find a selection of publications related to Tiona Nekkia McClodden.

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More information at kunsthallebasel.ch