

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo Courtesy of the Artist

Not all pulled back lips are smiles

by Megan Mizanty

Julia Baccellieri is one solid muscle. By merely standing, her back facing the audience, she renders the theatre silent. When she turns, her masked mouth reveals a latex, clown-like, eerie smile. Below her: she balances on a circular table, draped by an American flag.

Moving to the unmistakable words of Maya Angelou, Baccellieri contorts herself in a series of jaw-dropping inversions; her thoracic spine might as well be seaweed. Her chest quakes: a manufactured, fake laugh. *How do you navigate this country when you can't always be yourself?* This sequence could have gone on for double the time and still hold, mesmerize. Beads of perspiration gather on her skin, and all the while I think: *she's doing this—feats of impossible strength, heart pounding—while not being fully able to breathe.*

Exhale. The mask comes off. A projection clicks on. Harrowing images of a lynching. A sign: A man was lynched here. Moments later Baccellieri grips a rope, climbs and ascends one story above us. Surrounded by air, she transforms into a body resisting gravity and death. She secures herself and lets her feet dangle passively. She hovers with a limp body. The image sears.

She speaks! Back on the ground, Baccellieri tells us wisps of her life, her aspirations as a seminal Black woman circus performer. *I always wanted to be on stage.* I wish I could have heard more (a longer part II?). She confesses: she wasn't the first. In Barnum and Bailey's circus, [Joice Heth](#) was the spectacle, and her story is nothing less than social horror. In 2025, we need more performances like this: an exposure and a reminder.

This is America. The space pulses in blood red light, and Baccellieri grasps three large hoops in dizzying, varied rotations: on her wrists, arms, and chest. A hula hoop game on steroids. When Childish Gambino's voice thrums on, her (maskless) smile stretches and her gaze pierces the audience. *Look what I'm doing; look at how much I can hold at once; look at how I can't drop anything.* Baccellieri has resisted the stains of racism and patriarchal oppressions by growing her own body of work, as well as making her body a piece of art.

By calling on the Black ancestors of her past—Maya Angelou, Billie Holliday, Joice Heth, Nina Simone, and more—there's spirits in the room with her, guiding her, letting her grow deep, unshakeable roots.

[Strange Root](#), September 15-18, The Icebox Space, Philadelphia Fringe Festival, Cannonball

Homepage/Article Image Description: *There is a black grassy horizon line and a mostly full red moon rising. In the circle of the moon is a young black woman in a short sleeve white shirt and a black vest. Her Right arm is raised so her hands can frame above and below a small upside down american flag. She wears a circus style top hat and a mask over the bottom half of her face that is a clown's wide smile.*

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