

# Susan Hobbs

## Brendan Fernandes

### Biography

1979	Born in Nairobi, Kenya
2002	BFA, York University, Toronto
2005	MFA, Western University, Toronto

### Selected Solo Exhibitions

2024	<i>New Monuments</i>   Chicago, Black Cube Nomadic Art Museum, Chicago
2023	<i>Within Reach</i> , Susan Inglett Gallery, New York
2022	<i>The Left Space</i> , The Richmond Art Gallery, Richmond
2022	<i>Together We Are - Public Mural</i> , University at Buffalo Art Galleries, Buffalo
2021	<i>Together We Are</i> , The Walker Hotel Greenwich Village, New York
2020	<i>Brendan Fernandes: Bodily Forms</i> , The Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk
2019	<i>Call and Response</i> , The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
2019	<i>Ballet Kink</i> , The Guggenheim Museum, New York
2018	<i>Moving Change</i> , Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria
2017	<i>Free Fall 49</i> , The Getty, Los Angeles
2016	<i>Lost Bodies</i> , Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston
2015	<i>Still Move</i> , Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge
2014	<i>They</i> , Rodman Hall Art Centre, St. Catharines
2013	<i>Night Shift</i> , Nuit Blanche, Toronto,
2012	<i>The Devil's Noise</i> , Gallery Seven Art Limited, Delhi
2011	<i>Encomium</i> , Diaz Contemporary, Toronto
2010	<i>Until We Fearless</i> , Art Gallery of Hamilton, Hamilton
2009	<i>Relay League</i> , The Goldfarb Gallery, Toronto
2008	<i>For My Culture</i> , Alternator Gallery for Contemporary Art, Kelowna

### Selected Group Exhibitions

2024	<i>What is Seen and Unseen: Mapping South Asian American Art in Chicago</i> , South Asia Institute, Chicago
2024	<i>Other Arrangements: Poetics of the Performance Score</i> , Remail Modern, Saskatoon
2023	<i>Dance Party</i> , Edmonton Art Gallery, Edmonton
2022	<i>Expressive Works from the Seventeenth Century to the Present</i> , National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
2021	<i>All Together, Amongst Many: Reflections on Empathy</i> , Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, Omaha
2020	<i>Sanctuary</i> , Aga Khan Museum, Toronto
2018	<i>As Far As the Heart Can See</i> , Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts Project Space, New York
2017	<i>Lesson 0</i> , National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul
2016	<i>Land Mark</i> , Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City
2015	<i>Disguise</i> , Seattle Art Museum, Seattle
2014	<i>What is this Heart</i> , Berliner Festspiele, Berlin
2011	<i>Where Do We Migrate To?</i> , Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture, Baltimore
2010	<i>Harlem Postcards</i> , The Studio Museum in Harlem, Harlem
2009	<i>Everywhere, Nowhere, Somewhere</i> , Power House, Memphis
2008	<i>Dyed roots: the new emergence of culture</i> , MOCA, Toronto
2007	<i>Foire comme si tout allait bien!</i> , Centre Des Arts Actuels Skol, Montreal
2004	<i>Exposé 67</i> , Forest City Gallery, London
2003	<i>Den</i> , Gallery 61, Toronto
2002	<i>Mend</i> , The Propeller Centre for the Visual Arts, Toronto

## Collections

Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston; Art Gallery of Hamilton, Hamilton; Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax; Art Gallery of York University, Toronto; Block Museum of Art, Chicago; Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa; Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk; DePaul University Art Museum, Chicago; Global Affairs Canada Visual Art Collection, Gatineau; Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Montréal; Momenta Art, Brooklyn; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, Montréal; Museu de Arte de São Paulo, São Paulo; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Remai Modern, Saskatoon; The Rennie Collection, Vancouver; The University of Buffalo Art Galleries, Buffalo.

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# OBSERVER

## ***How Artist Brendan Fernandes Is Decolonizing Architecture Without Tearing It Down***

**‘Build Up the House’ on the façade of Chicago’s MART Building is a way of shining a light on “past narratives and experiences that need to find change.”**

By Gameli Hamelo • 10/10/24



Multidisciplinary artist and choreographer Brendan Fernandes. Photography by Virginia Harold. Courtesy of the artist and Pulitzer Arts Foundation

Right now, across the 2.5-acre façade of Chicago’s MART Building, a projection shows dancing silhouettes. Titled *Build Up the House*, it is the work of Chicago-based Kenya-born Indian-Canadian multidisciplinary artist and choreographer Brendan Fernandes, who explores issues like race, queer culture, migration and protest through installation and dance performances.

The work is a new commission by Fernandes, who was chosen as the headline artist for the fall season of ART on THE MART on Chicago’s Riverwalk. His piece, according to a statement, explores “through the visual language of projecting “new” doorways and windows, the idea of decolonizing architecture and creating new trajectories of accessibility.”

The ART on THE MART commission coincides with *In Two*, a new dance performance by Fernandes in collaboration with the Pulitzer Arts Foundation. His work has also been included in other major exhibitions, like “Movements Toward Freedom” at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver and “The Future is Present, The Harbinger is Home” at Prospect New Orleans, which will open in November.

Observer caught up with Fernandes to learn more about his practice and his recent and upcoming work.

**Your work has been described as often taking on hybrid forms: part ballet, part queer dance party, part political protest. Can you break that down?**

My work is hybrid in that it can be many things materially and conceptually. I see my work between the intersections of ideas and things, and at times, it can be a sculptural installation combined with ballet or some type of movement. I like my work to be between spaces where they are not always defined. I think of this as being “Queer” outside of the moniker of gender and sexual binaries. My work is not ever one static thing or idea.

come to this from my complex experiences of my cultural identity as a Kenyan, Canadian and Indian living in the U.S. I also come to this from my past life as a ballet dancer and movement maker where I have melded my visual art practice with my dance life and background. My political experiences in counter cultures, such as punk rock, also fuel how I think and propel the nuanced ways my works manifest. I consider my work as always in flux and it is ever-changing and evolving.

**What do you hope people experience when they see *Build Up the House*? How did you conceptualize this work, and what’s the idea behind it?**

I believe that we continue to live in precarious times, and the inspiration for my ART on THE MART project is to gather and bring people together to dance as a community, finding joy and being in solidarity. I want my ART on THE MART commission to give people who experience it a moment of an impromptu dance party. Chicago is celebrating its 40th anniversary of House Music, and this community is one that supports and celebrates diversity and inclusivity where music gives people a space to come and dance together. The sound is a collaboration with Chicago’s house DJ and musician Shaun J Wright.

Bodies dancing together for me is a form of expressing joy and freedom. For me, it is a metaphor for how we need to engage and act within our everyday social politics. The beginning of the animation depicts scaffolding to symbolize a space in flux, one that is being repaired or built up. This then continues to a section where portals—windows and doors—open onto the architecture of the Merchandise Mart creating “new” openings symbolizing new ways of seeing out of from and walking through. Dancers appear and move across and around the space and as the beats of the house music build up the scenes behind the dancers become more rich and vibrant in color. Many of the patterns showcase West African textiles made up of flowers and plants. The ending of the piece is a rich mixture of bodies dancing and supporting each other within cystoscopic floral patterns symbolizing a return to nature. In this return, we can think anew and start afresh.

**What’s the thinking around turning the building in the commission into a garden?**

For me, the return to a garden and nature is a metaphor for going backward in time and questioning the past as a form of a new beginning. We started in nature and maybe if we can think in a utopian manner, then returning to that space will allow us to make changes to grow again so we can foster a sense of optimism and a way to consider a new future possibility. The space of nature also acknowledges Indigenous communities and the ways that these people support and respect the land we inhabit. I think we need to listen to the land that we live on and collaborate with it more.

**Can you expand on decolonizing architecture across the Western world and creating new trajectories of accessibility?**

When I think about decolonizing architecture, it is not about dismantling a system or structure in a physical sense but finding growth to rebuild within what already exists. When I look at historical institutions and buildings like museums, for example, instead of demolishing them from the ground down, I think we should use them as reminders of past narratives and experiences that need to find change. I believe we need to make that change and rethink from within.

Again, scaffolding is a metaphor for this action, and when I say we must create new doorways and windows within that architecture, I am asking us to find new ways, physically and metaphorically, to walk into a space or to look outwardly out of that space. This creates accessibility and allows for a new way to think and experience the space. It opens up the space to allow people to enter and be a part of it in a new way.

**Can you talk about your new dance performance in collaboration with the Pulitzer Arts Foundation?**

I am still in bliss from the whole experience, which was only a few days ago [in early September]. The work is a collaborative piece, or a duet as I would like to call it, between my work and the legacy of Scott Burton. My work is immersed and placed inside a retrospective of Burton's sculpture and ephemera. Like me, Burton made work that has a synergy and collaboration between the live performing body and sculpture. For this show, I made a series of curtains and soft sculptures at the Fabric Workshop Museum.

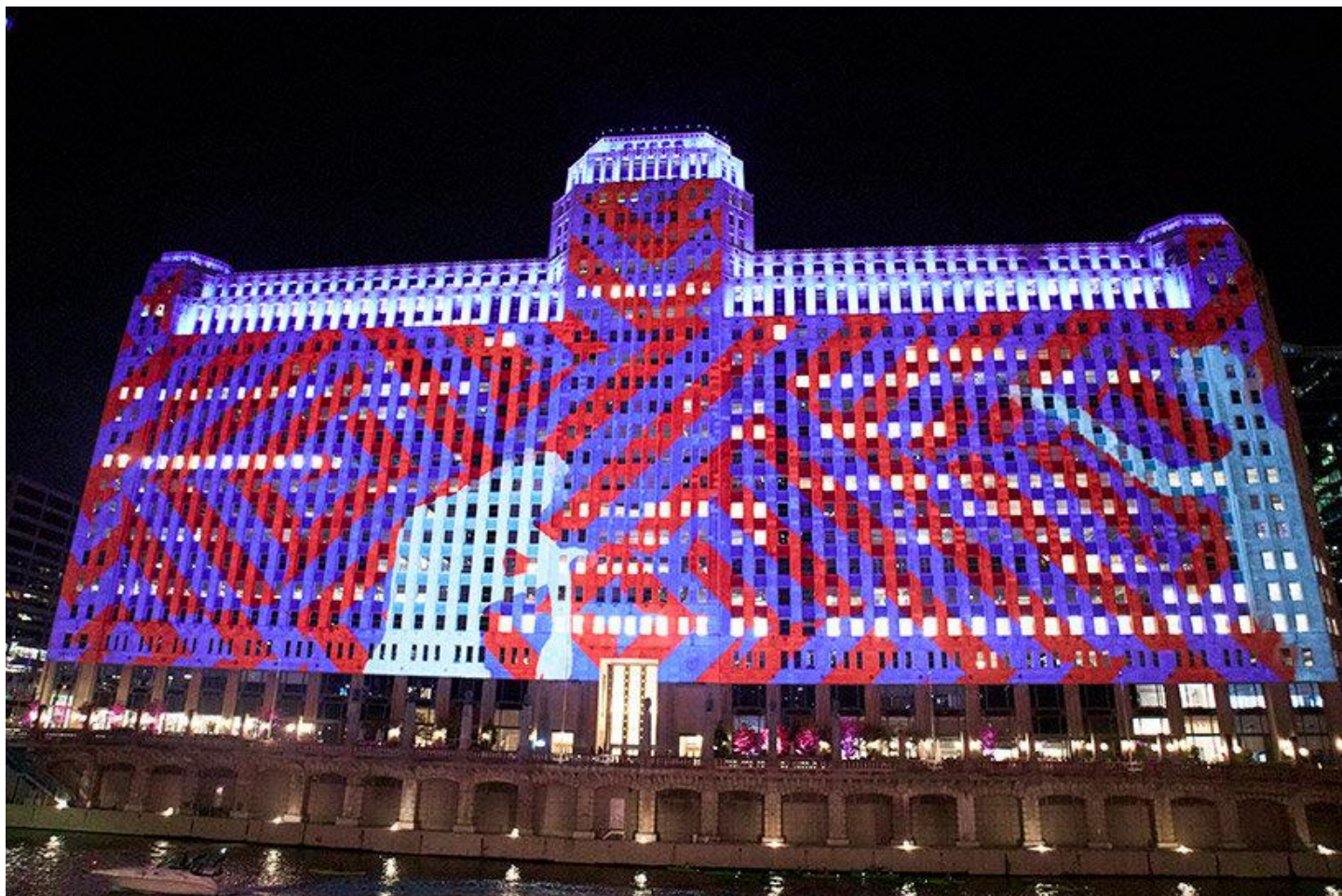
The curtains take the markings of my finger swipes from my cell phone screen while on gay dating applications. These become bodily gestures that reference a new form of cruising, but I also interpret them as directional marks that can also be interpreted as a lyrical dance score. Burton also made his performance works as duets and so in the live performances, my dancers are cruising the space, looking and trying to find each other while interacting with the stone sculpture of Burton but also with my soft curtain and a set of sculptures that look like rock but are pillows. These interactions for me are duets, whether two bodies coming together or a body interaction with a stone Burton or my soft sculptural piece. The exchange is intimate and evokes the bodily sentiments of gay cruising. The work is about visibility and supporting and caring for one another.

**What can you share about your upcoming performance at Prospect New Orleans?**

My work for Prospect 6 is not new but a re-performance of a piece I created in 2018 for Nuit Blanche Toronto. The work is about police systems that seemingly are visible in urban spaces but most often don't support or protect marginalized communities. The piece came out of a moment in Toronto's history when the Queer community conflicted with the police. In response, I created a space where "Police" cars rented from a movie studio create a formation between and around a stage where queer and POC DJs played music and we asked the greater Toronto community to gather and dance in a critical mass of solidarity. We danced in joy and honor of our freedom but the animation of the disco and party were the flashing lights of the police sirens. The work is about finding freedom but asking the critical mass to stop and think about why we are celebrating under the flashing lights of law enforcement, a system that needs reform in my mind.



For Prospect 6, we will close out the triennial with *On Flashing Lights*. The piece will have a much different resonance in New Orleans and so I am working with many local Queer and POC allies from the city to create this work for Prospect 6. As a lead-up to the dance party, I will gather people's voices through a prompt that asks, "What song makes you feel free on the dance floor?" We will take the responses and make a playlist of songs that we will share and give out. I hope these songs of freedom will allow us to continue dancing in many different spaces.



**Brendan Fernandes' *Build Up the House*, 2024 is on view at night on THE MART on Chicago's Riverwalk through November 20.**



Dancers ascend the steps to the General John Alexander Logan Monument, as part of a durational performance in a sculptural installation surrounding the monument by artist Brendan Fernandes titled, “New Monuments | Chicago,” in Grant Park, April 12, 2024, in Chicago. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)

## ***Photos: The New Monuments art exhibit, part of Expo Chicago***

By John Kim

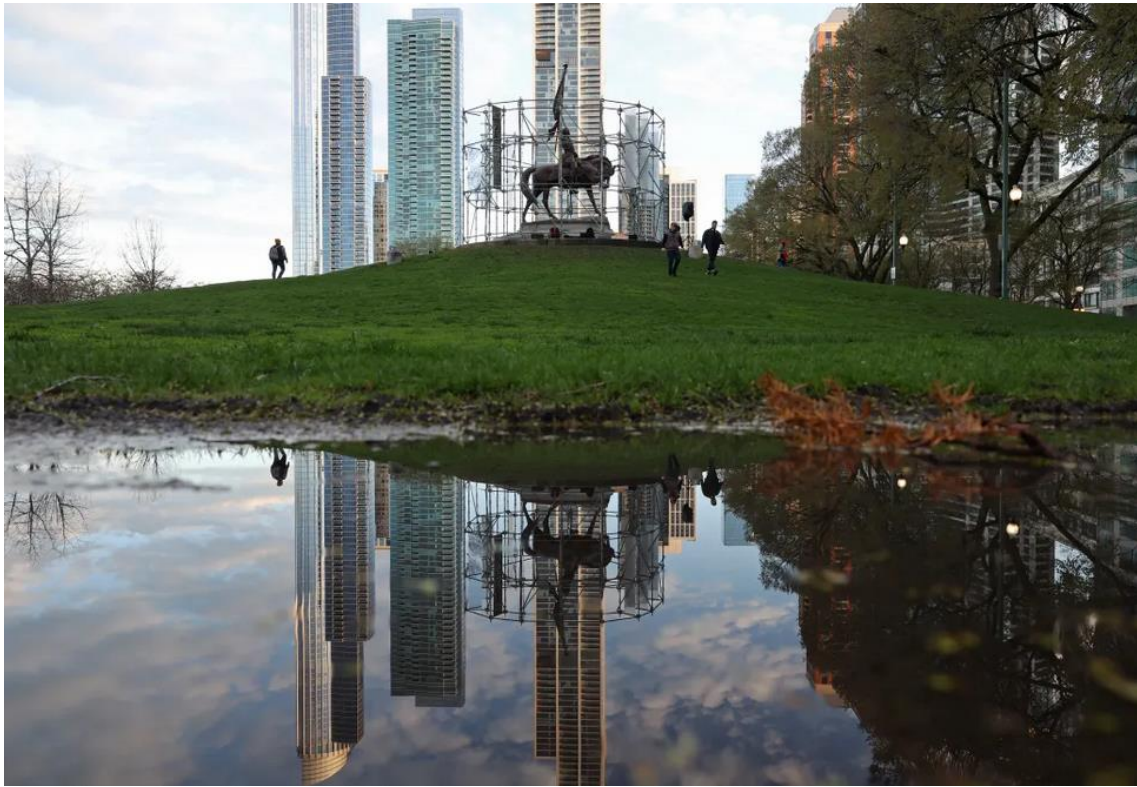
PUBLISHED: April 15, 2024

As part of the annual Expo Chicago’s contemporary and modern art showcase, artist Brendan Fernandes’ sculptural installation, *New Monuments | Chicago* surrounds the General John Alexander Logan Monument in Chicago’s Grant Park. Made of scaffolding, this structure symbolically marks the statue as “in transition,” revisiting the complex history of its likeness, General Logan—a nineteenth-century figure who initially worked to prohibit Black people from settling in Illinois, but who later advocated for the abolishment of slavery and supported African American rights.

Fernandes will activate his temporary installation with a durational performance that includes light, sound, and a cast of dancers from Chicago’s BIPOC and Queer communities. Taking place after dark, the monument is illuminated to reveal the dancers’ bodies forming physical expressions of tableaux, incorporating elements of lifting, carrying, and contact improvisation. The performance aims to create a vibrant gathering space that expands narratives of hope for public sites to better reflect the communities they serve.

Audiences are asked to write down their visions for a monument that represents inclusivity on a custom tag. Tags will be available on site during public hours at Black Cube’s shipping container, and will be collected and displayed to illustrate the plurality of voices that make up the City of Chicago.





sculptural installation titled “New Monuments | Chicago,” by artist Brendan Fernandes surrounds the General John Alexander Logan Monument in Grant Park Friday, April 12, 2024, in Chicago. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)

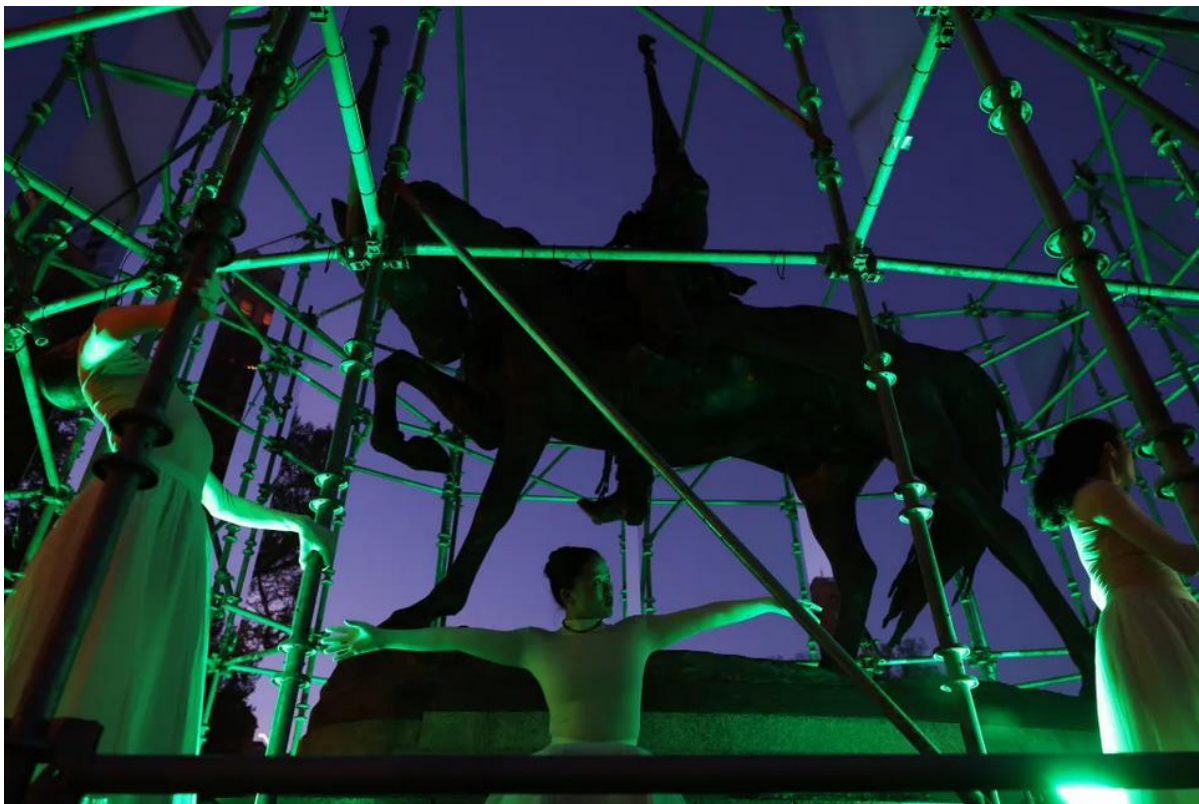


Dancers ascend the steps to the General John Alexander Logan Monument, as part of a durational performance in a sculptural installation surrounding the monument by artist Brendan Fernandes titled, “New Monuments | Chicago,” in Grant Park Friday, April 12, 2024, in Chicago. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)









Dancer Lieana Sherry, center, performs



Dancers Katlin Michael Bourgeois (cq), left, and Lieana Sherry (cq) perform



Dancer Michelle Reid performs



Brendan Fernandes, *Within Reach*, at Susan Inglett Gallery, through January 27



Brendan Fernandes. Photo: Michael Salisbury. Courtesy of the artist and Susan Inglett Gallery.

Brendan Fernandes is the subject of his first solo exhibition with Susan Inglett Gallery, “*Within Reach*,” comprised of a series of sculptures as well as a program of activations performed by contemporary dancers. Fernandes’s sculptures are inspired by West African headrests, functionally made to preserve complex hairstyles while the wearer sleeps, but with deep-rooted cultural and spiritual importance, with the belief that these objects can promote dreams or prevent nightmares.

Meanwhile, the artist’s choreography juxtaposed with the artworks results in a hybrid dialogue between African and Western artistic practices and presents a complex critique of colonialism and insight into the Fernandes’s own personal identity. (The next performance is scheduled for Saturday, January 20, 2024.)

Also on view in the exhibition are works from the “*As One*” photography project undertaken by Fernandes in 2015. Originally initiated as part of a commission for the Seattle Art Museum, and later expanded upon using the Cravens Collection at the UB Art Galleries, within the context of the performed dances, the work further interrogates the colonial legacies of the West.



# Redefining Ballet, Redefining Form, Challenging Control: The Art of Brendan Fernandes

BY JOHN BATEMAN | OCTOBER 12, 2022



*Brendan Fernandes, "The Master and Form," 2019 Whitney Biennial. Originally commissioned by the Graham Foundation, Chicago/Photo: Matthew Carasella, courtesy the artist*

"I was told I was good, but that I'd never be a principal dancer because Romeo is a white male," Brendan Fernandes says. "I wasn't tall enough, my feet didn't have arches. Ballet has a hierarchy that there's only 'one way' to do ballet. I'm challenging that system."

The Kenya-born, Canada-raised artist finds pleasure in dismantling stereotypes. Fernandes, who attributes his sense of politics to punk rock and counterculture, left ballet for modern dance because it was considered “freer.” Although Fernandes has explored and incorporated other art forms, performance has always been at his core: he once described how he danced across the hall as a student at York University from one class to another.

His latest project is “Re/Form,” published by Skira in collaboration with The Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts and The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, a monograph that archives—and perhaps translates—“Master and Form” and “Contract and Release,” two collaborative performances that merge ballet, sculpture and leather kink subcultures into something unorthodox.

“Master and Form” was commissioned by the Graham Foundation in 2018. Expanded for the 2019 Whitney Biennial, it includes an array of sculptures and steel cages that explore the discipline of the body within ballet. “Contract and Release,” curated in 2019 for the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, explores Fernandes’ life as a modern dancer, placing performers with steel cages and some of Isamu Noguchi’s own sculptural works. In each, performers use the equipment to push and shape and balance their bodies.



Having experienced the rigidity of dance, Fernandes still wanted to explore freedom and the body. As a queer person of color, he found community in counterculture and BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadism and submission, masochism), though he still encountered systems of hierarchy there. Fernandes asked himself a key question, “How do we find freedom within restraint?” Drawing inspiration from the striking similarities between ballet and BDSM, particularly in the ways the body is fetishized, desired and often subject to intense mastery and hierarchy, Fernandes began his research to build structures and performances that connected these concepts. “Now, I’m making full body devices to put the body into manipulated positions to challenge it. As dancers, there’s a masochistic way we push and challenge our bodies.”



*Brendan Fernandes, "Contract and Release," The Noguchi Museum, New York, 2019/Photo: Matthew Carasella, courtesy the artist*

Fernandes' process gives the dancers agency and a sense of care. "The dancers are allowed to leave whenever they want. They can take off their shoes and are given allowances for more choices," he says. This includes allowing the performers to rotate authoritative roles, calling the barre. Fernandes recalls one dancer, whose first language is not English, who called softly: "They didn't feel comfortable, so I let them give the count in their own language."

"Re/Form" continues to explore these concepts. Described as a way to archive the performances, Fernandes approached the museums where the works were performed with the idea. "Re/Form," says Fernandes, "gave me purpose to still do my work, but in a different way during the pandemic."

The book includes photographs of performances and drawings of sculptural equipment and cages, which Fernandes describes as "playgrounds" for the dancers. Critical essays are separated by "scores" that, similar to sheet music for musicians, are a written embodiment of dance instructions. Fernandes says the scores are born from the need for an archive. "We've lost a lot of history because there's no written language for dance, and it's currently archived through the camera. In the Fluxus movement of the 1960s, dance artists, particularly Yoko Ono, would write down ideas—not necessarily purely understood—a gesture of trying to give a sense of what the dance could be."

“Re/Form” has become a critical part of Fernandes’ performance work. The book itself, much like the dance performances it translates, was a collaboration, which is very much part of Fernandes’ practice. “I feel that it’s something I’m good at. I just understand how to collaborate. In general, socially and politically, we need to be more collaborative: it’s a political space of solidarity.”

Although the sculptural equipment is in a private collection and the performances have ended for now, Fernandes hopes “Re/Form” allows their legacy to have a different life. “My practice can reach a different audience and introduce my concepts to a greater society. I want my work to push people.”  
(John W. Bateman)

*“RE/Form” is available at the Graham Foundation Bookshop and Noguchi Museum Shop. A free, public launch party is scheduled at 21c, 55 East Ontario, on October 21.*