

TORONTO STAR

Art world likes where he's coming from

Brendan Fernandes is a unique hybrid, an Indian-Kenyan-Canadian artist whose unique views on identity have earned him a prestigious Sobey Award nomination



Artist Brendan Fernandes shown with part of his *Until We Fearless* exhibit in Hamilton, Ontario (AARON HARRIS / TORONTO STAR)

By **MURRAY WHYTE**
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HAMILTON—If you were to cobble together a short-form version of Brendan Fernandes' recent art-driven itinerary, it would go something like this: South Africa, Korea, Toronto, Montreal,

Denmark, Pittsburgh, New York, Hamilton, Algonquin Park, New York, Prague, New York again, who knows?

"My business card says 'nomadic artist,'" he says with a chuckle of mild exasperation. New York is supposed to be home, but "my friends say I don't really even live there. I just visit from time to time."

Between exhibitions, residencies and projects around the world (and that much-deserved family vacation in Algonquin), it's been quite a year as Fernandes, just 30, becomes a brand-name on the Canadian and international art scenes.

And this November presents the tantalizing possibility for a capper: In Montreal, the \$75,000 annual Sobey Prize for contemporary art will be presented to one of five finalists, Fernandes among them.

But not to get ahead of himself. "It's a real honour, absolutely," he says, quieting a bit. (His nomination raised several eyebrows — Fernandes' included — among a community expecting an older, more established nominee. "I was surprised, totally," he shrugs. "The Sobey's a big deal, internationally.")

But there are miles to travel between now and then. Today, Fernandes is in Hamilton, documenting his first major solo museum show at the public art gallery here, which opened in June. A synthetic tribal-seeming beat thuds with quiet urgency throughout; in a room off to the side, plastic deer decoys sport equally faux-plastic replicas of Masai masks, posed stiltedly amid pale silhouettes of African spears that line the walls.

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Nearby, the main space is anchored by a rough structure of lumber and corrugated plastic (“I call it The Shack,” Fernandes says, smiling), which houses four video monitors, each with their own crisply-sterile digital rendering of an African mask.

The monitors pulse as the masks shift from black to white, some features added, others fading. It’s ominous but oddly artificial — a sanitized, simulated dread conjured by computer algorithms instead of adrenalin.

Which, for Fernandes, is part of the point. “Africa always gets discussed as this monolith, but it’s a complex, diverse place,” he says. “Objects, like masks, are exoticized in this generalized way — just like the fears created around it.”

He would know. Born in Nairobi, Fernandes’ family was of Indian descent, having settled in Kenya four generations before. In short, they were African, but the British colonial establishment identified them not only as Indian, but Goan — a southern region of India (and former Portuguese colony) to which none of them had ever been, but were labelled with all the same. “It was the British colonial idea of divide and conquer,” he said. “There were Goan schools, Goan churches.”

When Fernandes was 9, his family decamped from Nairobi — “there was a sense it was just too dangerous,” he recalled — arriving in Newmarket in the early ‘90s. Here, Fernandes began to develop a sense of his hybrid identity more acutely.

“When people see me, they say, ‘well, you’re Indian.’ But I don’t have a close connection with that at all. What’s more, we’re Goan Indians, so we’re Portuguese heritage, too. But I have no connection to that at all. I’m Kenyan, but also Canadian — I’ve lived most of my life here. But what does that mean?”

“Cultural identity is something that’s constantly in flux and in transition, I think. There’s this constant question of where I’m from.”

Fernandes’ particular hybridity offers a fresh take on the old standard of identity politics in contemporary art, and it caught the eye of Philip Monk, the director of the Art Gallery at York University. Monk was on the jury for the Sobey this year, and chose all the candidates on Ontario’s long list. “It’s refreshing to see some of the themes Brendan is working with,” Monk said. “He has such a unique look at identity. He very quickly developed a focused body of work. For such a young artist, it’s really something.”

For Fernandes, the general dislocations of his experience raise questions about identity in an increasingly false, fractured, homogenizing world.

Love Kill, a series of three simple, animated line drawings in Hamilton, show three African predators — a jackal, a lion and a cheetah — their teeth locked on their prey, moments before death. On headphones, Fernandes sings, a cappella, three drippy love songs from the ‘80s (“The technician I was working with asked me, ‘Is there something you want to tell me?’” he chuckled).

But the piece underscores the portrayal of the false-exotic Fernandes feels so intensely. “It’s like melodrama — every documentary you see of Africa has to show the kill. And when you’re on safari, you have to see the kill,” he says. “Tourists want to have that experience, of wild and untamed Africa, while they stay in pseudo-huts with hot tubs and 500-thread-count linen sheets. There’s this false authenticity.”

It’s something Fernandes knows well, his father having worked in the safari industry as an accountant before coming to Canada. “When we came to Newmarket, I was always trying to negotiate a sense of memory, a sense of nostalgia, and it came to me through those kinds of documentary films,” he says. “It’s strange, too, because I didn’t live that experience every day, but that’s what I’m nostalgic about.”

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Authenticity's a slippery subject — the notion that something essential and true could exist at all is, at best, dubious — and Fernandes offers no treatise on its value, only questions as to its existence. In Hamilton, fake deer wear plastic masks reproduced from an iconic Masai carving — spiritual artifact recast bluntly as throwaway commodity and tourist tchotchke. In the shack, masks are stripped of even the pretense of human hands, coolly rendered with data and left to glow in the chill of binary code.

It's a happy coincidence that, in the gallery space next to Fernandes show is a spectacular, ominous, unabashedly exotic exhibition of African masks, donated to the AGH by Toronto collectors Joey and Toby Tanenbaum. Even here, provenance can be fraught, Fernandes says, given the mask industry's gifts for fakery.

In New York, Fernandes is working on a project for Art in General, a venerable artist-run centre, that delves into the cultural headfake commodity culture routinely pulls. Researching provenance reports from the Metropolitan Museum's ancient African mask collection, Fernandes then cruised the junk stalls of Canal Street, collecting his own contemporary artifacts — masks mass-produced and faux-antiqued, factory style, sold alongside cheap sunglasses and other tourist-trade standards.

"It becomes like an 'I Love NY' sticker — they're all sold in the same place by the same people," he says.

That these objects are often sold by the same people for whom they're meant to carry significance adds another layer. "A lot of them are African immigrants from places like the Sudan," Fernandes says.

A 2008 performance piece, *Foe*, saw Fernandes hire a dialogue coach to teach him to speak in the accents of his forebears — Kenyan and Goan, for example. Language fascinates him, particular versions of patois hybridizing the colonial English tongue into weird cultural systems all their own (the title of the Hamilton show, "until we fearless," is "my own patois," he says, highlighting the unjustified terror projected on an oversimplified African circumstance.)

For all his fascination with the implications of rootlessness, Fernandes himself is unperturbed by it. "I question this idea of belonging all the time, but I've moved so much, I'm always able to find a belonging, so to speak. I'm actually really lucky — I feel like I belong in many places," he says.

That said, he's looking forward to just one. "To be in my own bed for more than a month?" he smiles. "That would be great."