

CANADIANART

Brendan Fernandes: The Nature of Culture

APRIL 7, 2011 [PANDORA SYPEREK](#)



SPOTLIGHT
Brendan Fernandes
Interview with Pandora Syperek
Photography by Jeffery M. Smith

BY **PANDORA SYPEREK**

Brendan Fernandes's work reminds me of a line from The Smiths' 1986 hit "Ask." "Nature is a language—can't you read?" Morrissey croons to the shy object of his affection. In contrast, Fernandes is anything but shy: meeting with him at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal one rainy Friday afternoon, he comes across as ebullient and friendly. He is exceptionally eloquent about his work; it is readily apparent that the Kenyan-born artist, who now divides his time between Toronto and New York, is impeccably versed in the language of nature. His canny multimedia installations, which employ various animal forms and safari imagery to address issues of postcolonial identity, earned him a place on the short list for the prestigious 2010 Sobey Art Award.

At 30, Fernandes was one of the youngest artists ever to be short-listed for the award. He has been celebrated as somewhat of a wunderkind, having consolidated a remarkably cohesive body of work since receiving his MFA from the University of Western Ontario in 2005. In the years that followed, Fernandes completed the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum in New York, and garnered high praise both in Canada and abroad. "He is one of the most prolific young Canadian artists that I know," says Melissa Bennett, who curated the artist's solo exhibition, "until we started," at the Art Gallery of Hamilton (AGH) last year. Eric C. Stone, who is acting director at Pittsburgh's Andy Warhol Museum and who interviewed Fernandes for the exhibition catalogue, explains that Fernandes's output "is complex on a variety of levels, analyzing such disparate topics as race, individual identities, gender roles and cultural anthropology, and yet he seamlessly combines these diverse subjects to create thought-provoking work that is both academic and emotive."

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Brendan Fernandes with *The World Is a Better Place* (2010) and *The Nature of Culture* (2010) at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Photo: Jeffery M. Smith

The Nature of Culture

Sobey nominee **BRENDAN FERNANDES**
explores transnational identity

This feature article on Brendan Fernandes was written by Pandora Syperek, winner of the 2010 Canadian Art Foundation Writing Prize. This annual juried prize is designed to encourage new writers on contemporary art. The winner of this national competition is commissioned to write a feature story for Canadian Art and receives a cash prize, while two runners-up receive recognition in the magazine and a cash award. The deadline for this year's applications is July 15, 2011. For more details and application information, please visit canadianart.ca/writingprize.

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Upon entering Fernandes’s section of the Sobeys exhibition in Montreal, one was confronted by a herd of life-sized plastic deer wearing African masks made of white resin. Though potentially menacing, the fake creatures were all braced in the same startled position, as if prepared to flee. A forest of vinyl spears that wrapped the gallery wall—at once violent and decorative—further confounded the juxtaposition between the deer’s jeering false faces and their timid disposition. Entitled *Neo-Primitivism II* (2007), this plastic-fantastic *mise en scène* playfully invokes postcolonial critiques of the gaze that emerges in encounters with the unknown. Fernandes likens the dynamic of looking and being looked at to the experience of the zoo or the natural history museum. “Animals are really important for my work,” he says. But what separates Fernandes’s work from a rash of “animal art” is that it’s not really about animals at all. Rather than investigating the relationship between humans and beasts, which has been the focus of much recent art, Fernandes exploits natural metaphors to consider interhuman dynamics.

Anthropomorphizing animals to convey moral lessons is a trope, employed in cultural artifacts from medieval bestiaries to *Animal Farm* to Disney’s *The Lion King*. But instead of a direct translation of human affairs into animal form, Fernandes’s use of fauna is twice-removed: he explores how we look at animals in order to consider what that says about people. *Slow Kill* (2007) is a video work that isolates scenes of “the kill” from nature documentaries and slows them down into frame-by-frame, 24-second tableaux. These gory episodes are ubiquitous in nature programs—David Attenborough’s series *Life* elicited comparisons to snuff films. They attest to a visual pleasure found in death. Through his use of the freeze-frame, Fernandes likens this morbid fascination to the fetishism of technology. Each still’s time-span references the 24 frames per second of film footage; the artist thus immensely protracts these licentious instants. The art of death takes on an erotic element.

The artist explores this concept further in *Love Kill* (2009), in which simple line-drawing animations of predator and prey in the moment of capture are overlaid with sound recordings of popular love songs sung by Fernandes himself. Instead of veering toward camp, his breathy and overblown yet meek a cappella performance of Dolly Parton’s “I Will Always Love You,” for instance, achieves an over-the-top poignancy, reminiscent of so many wannabe stars on YouTube. Combined with a minimalist animation of a lion claspng a wildebeest by the throat, and a faint soundtrack of birds chirping, the work unites feigned emotion with a sense of stillness—the tranquility of death. “There’s an air of desperation now,” says Fernandes.

It is significant that the animals in these works are African. Kill scenes are not only present in many documentaries about African wildlife, they also form a requisite component of the touristic safari experience. Such stereotypes deeply inform Fernandes’s work, despite—or perhaps due to—his having emigrated from Kenya as a child. There is a sense in his installations of trying to recover some lost

essence, although this endeavour is continually tempered by a cheeky acknowledgement of the futility of seeking the “authentic.”

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In addition to his use of animals to unravel cultural metaphors, masks also play a key role in Fernandes’s investigations of language and its disjunctures—or disguises. In *Voo Doo You Doo Speak* (2010), a major installation Fernandes created for the AGH exhibition, a streamlined hut made of pine, corrugated aluminum and sheet plastic encloses several monitors that feature graphic animated masks. The black-and-white animations flash light and dark in a percussive tempo. Each mask is accompanied by a sound piece, in which a woman’s voice recites what sounds like pidgin or jaberwocky poetry: “Theys come in Becks/Lex Lex Co nology/Blooded, Millaka, Pizz!” one exclaims. A sense of animism pervades this work. Fernandes wants to communicate “the idea that these objects are speaking in tongues.” He wrote the “Dada poems” himself and based the masks on those in the gallery’s permanent collection of African art. Within the modernist shantytown shack, the artist invents his own cultural construct.

Fernandes’s interest lies in the changeability and constant flux of identity, as something that innately defies authenticity. Fernandes’s own cultural background presents a challenge to a fixed notion of identity: though born in Nairobi, his family descends from Goa, a former Portuguese colony in India. Meanwhile, Fernandes himself spent much of his childhood in Newmarket, Ontario. In his video *Foe* (2008), the artist is taught by an acting coach to speak with his various “heritage accents.” The text he recites to practice these different tongues is from J.M. Coetzee’s novel of the same title, a postmodern retelling of *Robinson Crusoe*. In close-ups of Fernandes’s mouth repeatedly attempting the phrase “they cut out his tongue,” we witness the artist’s struggle to feign an identity through its linguistic trappings.

Though Fernandes integrally draws on his cultural history, assessments of his work have often overemphasized the importance of his ethnic background. Hybridity is a standard feature of contemporary Canadian identity—the familiarity of Fernandes’s story may be more significant than its rarity. In *Performing Foe* (2009), Fernandes takes on the role of teacher, instructing a group of pupils to speak in his cultural voices. This sequel to *Foe* works to disperse the very concept of discrete identity, democratizing culture through mimicry. The AGH purchased both videos, which will be exhibited in dialogue with an African art collection that has been promised to the gallery.

In Fernandes’s work, the “semiotics of Africa” also form a visual rhetoric through which other ideas are explored, much like the artist’s use of animals as metaphors. “I use my trajectory of migration and movement, but my work deals with my experiences,” he explains. “I use cultural tropes to look at ideas of love, gender, sexuality, politics, capitalism, power and hegemony.”

As a gay man, Fernandes sometimes encounters viewers who are surprised his work doesn’t have a more “queer” reading to it. However, gendered dichotomies are among the power structures he subverts with his installations, which include elements such as masquerading female deer surrounded by phallic but flat spears, and delicate, almost effeminate versions of pop songs accompanying violent kill scenes.

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Even the artist's use of the decorative points towards a critique of gender, while equally referencing commerce and museum display itself. Fernandes's intervention into display practices forms the strongest aspect of his work. The sleek voodoo hut, graphic spears and totemic columns at the AGH leave a lasting impression; meanwhile, vinyl circles placed on the floor guide the viewer through the exhibition, much like the giant footprints at the Toronto Zoo or the arrows at IKEA. These circles are in fact a visual take on Morse code, and spell out the title of the exhibition: "until we fearless."

The spatial aspect of the show suggests choreography; Fernandes's interest in body language is not surprising, considering his background in dance. In upcoming projects he expects to directly link movement with language and sound. Movement, both corporeal and geographical, is clearly a core theme in the artist's work. If there were a better label for Fernandes than "hybrid," it would be "nomadic." Besides splitting his time between Canada and the U.S., in the past year alone he has worked on projects in South Korea, the Czech Republic, Sweden and Denmark. Though Fernandes did not receive the 2010 Sobey (it went to the Winnipeg artist Daniel Barrow), his itinerary is chock-full; for one thing, he is showing a work in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's spring exhibition, "Found in Translation." As Bennett points out, with Fernandes's youth, focus and dynamism, "it may be that we see him move in new directions in the next little while. I'm looking forward to seeing what's next."

For more views of Fernandes's work visit canadianart.ca/fernandes.