

Brendan Fernandes: *FREE FALL*

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Brendan Fernandes, *Free Fall* (installation view), 2017. Photo: courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

Reviewed by contributing editor James Yood

The artist who first comes to mind when visiting Brendan Fernandes' intriguing exhibition is Man Ray. Not that Fernandes' work resembles Man Ray's all that much, though both did evocative and surprising works based on coat hangers. Rather, it is the innate flexibility both artists share, their natural instinct to roam from material to material: to be a sculptor and then a photographer; a performance artist and then a collagist; a, well, a video maker or a filmmaker. One might paint, the other work hot glass, or the other way around if the need arose. It's not so much their uncommitted grazing through art platforms as it is the importance of reaching for the right material to do the job at hand—of not being driven by medium but by attitude, by concept. For Fernandes, aided by a recent residency at the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Washington, glass is looming larger than usual in his practice, and the two major sculptures/installations here were rooted in the material.

Free Fall (2016) is installed in multiple parts in different areas of the gallery; it's a scattering of five coat racks with 49 glass coat hangers hung on them, each one shaped from an individually flameworked clear glass rod. Some of the hangers cluster in a group, some appear singly, all empty, bereft of any garment. The coat racks themselves were ordinary, though their presentation in the high-art context of a contemporary art gallery made

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them wondrous examples of functional design being transformed into sculpture. An empty hanger evokes a kind of loss or incompleteness, a sort of denuded body mimicking the shape of shoulders and rounded head. Making them out of glass has them further skirt the edge of functionality; too delicate and brittle to withstand much use, each becomes the sign of a hanger. While it's not immediately apparent—after all, art is not show-and-tell—the viewer eventually learns that Fernandes' 49 hangers refer to the 49 victims killed in a mass shooting in an Orlando nightclub on June 12, 2016.

The other large work here was an installation of eight mid-scale glass sculptures set on seven pedestals of differing height, all comprising the artist's "No Body" series of 2016. Here, the idea of Brancusi seemed at the forefront, with each dun or off-white object (blown and then sealed and sandblasted to give an eroded and weathered air) exuding a suave, classical, timeless aura that seemed a meeting between Brancusi and ancient Cycladic figures. Despite their title, they everywhere suggest a torso culminating at a neck, with a swelling chest tapering downward to a narrower waist. While a few do seem more avian than human, the latter dominate; they are reduced beyond individual personhood to a symbolic form, and their arrangement on pedestals of different heights gave them the over-designed, museological aura that Josiah McElheny often evokes. There is a sense that these votive figures—if that's what they are—are now embalmed in their own display. A one-liner variant on this series is *Encounter* (2016), in which two of these figures—one black, one white—share a smallish pedestal with their backs turned forever away from each other.

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