

Brendan Fernandes's Sculptures Explore the Masochism of Ballet

The Kenyan-born artist's new show at the Graham Foundation presents live dancers with some unique challenges.

By Osman Can Yerebakan
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View of *Brendan Fernandes: The Master and Form*, in development, 2017, Graham Foundation, Chicago. Dancer: Leah Upchurch, photo and rendering: Norman Kelley

In a just-completed residency at the Graham Foundation in Chicago, Kenyan-born artist Brendan Fernandes developed an installation and performance series titled *The Master and Form*. Fernandes, who quit dancing as a child, is working now with dancers from the city's Joffrey Academy of Dance to activate five wooden sculptures. Made in collaboration with design collective Norman Kelley, these geometric objects were inspired by ballet training devices and engage the performers' bodies in some unexpected ways.

GARAGE: How has *The Master and Form* changed your understanding of ballet, your long-

standing passion? Are you still engaged in the ballet community?

Brendan Fernandes: I'm aware that the ballet world may not be very into this work because of the way it depicts being a dancer. When I was a kid, I was told my feet didn't have arches, so they also put my feet into a device to help form them. *The Master and Form* is about questioning pain and pleasure through the mastery of form. Body training devices that help shape the specific physique of a dancer were the inspiration for the sculptures, which are reminiscent of torture devices designed for users' bodies.

While ballet training involves suffering, the perfection of an elegant performance eventually displaces the struggle. What does the ranking of dancers reveal about the discipline's power dynamics?

Ballet is linked to royalty, and there is a strict hierarchy starting with corp dancers, soloists and then principals; in this sense it's also similar to the military. The audience's attention is focused on the principal, but a corp dancer has to stand still in the same position for minutes at a time. This might sound easy, but it requires immense labor and training. The higher a dancer rises through the hierarchy, the more movement is expected. This is another contradiction, because in general a higher rank usually equates to *less* physical labor, not more.

Does your work point to a correlation between ballet and S&M culture in its balancing of pain and pleasure?

Masochism is a part of ballet. I'm interested in the question of power within one's own self or through authorities—or "masters" as teachers are called in ballet. Within ballet's power system, dancers have to obey the master's commands and rules. A friend who is involved in leather scene in Chicago asked me how one becomes a master of ballet, and I said to him, "You tell me!"

Race is another topic in ballet, and in your work. I remember reading about what "nude" ballet slippers mean for dancers of color, for example.

Seamlessness is considered important, so dancers' costumes have always been tailored to support unity, from their color to their style. When I was a kid in ballet, I was told I could never rise in my career because I could never be Romeo. Racially, Romeo is white, so even as a principal I could never play that character. Misty Copeland, who played Juliette, is the first dancer of color to become a principal in the history of American ballet.

The sculptures in *The Master and Form* are activated by dancers following your guidelines. How exactly does this work?

Dancers move according to my guidelines, but retain the freedom to leave. There's something modernist about these black wood sculptures that's reminiscent of Danish midcentury furniture. When dancers caress them, their bodies realize that the sculptures are ergonomic. The objects help them stay in certain positions and also create intimacy and tactility. The challenge comes from the struggle to stay in the same position for longer. The devices both help dancers achieve the positions and challenge their comfort.

How do you interpret the established distribution of gender roles in ballet? Are you trying to subvert the dynamic between male and female dancers?

I see the environment I create as a transformative queer space open to discussion and

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celebration. The performances will help dancers to see alternative ways that ballet can happen, challenging its formal conventions. The swan dive, for example, is a position performed by female dancers in *Swan Lake* in which the swan dancers fold over their legs and arms. When I asked a male dancer to deliver a swan dive, he gave me a confused look. But queering the space doesn't only define gender roles, it also creates a safe space in which individuals can feel the full autonomy of their bodies. This project, and S&M culture correspond with an emphasis on trust and confidence within a space where roles of mastery and submission are in play.

Brendan Fernandes: The Master and Form is on view at the Graham Foundation, Chicago, through March 10.