

Endurance art that explores 'mastery' in architecture and ballet

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Endurance art that explores 'mastery' in architecture and ballet. Brendan Fernandes' "The Master and Form" performance still (Brendan Maera)

In many ways, architecture and ballet are natural accomplices. Both disciplines are irrevocably entwined with the body—as much as contemporary architectural practice tries to shirk this fact—and both are dedicated to the illusion of impossible ease, obscuring endless hours of grueling work and practice. But an exhibition opening this week in Chicago at the Graham Foundation strips away that mask. Instead, Brendan Fernandes: *The Master and Form* demonstrates the often perverse labor that goes into the pursuit of perfection.

The Master and Form exhibition consists of a series of installations placed throughout the Madlener House, the Graham Foundation's Prairie-style home, designed in collaboration with Chicago and New York-based practice Norman Kelley. These installations double as hyper-specific training devices on which dancers from the Joffrey Academy of Dance train their bodies into classic ballet poses, in performances of site-specific endurance art.

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"The exhibition is a means of exploring the relationship between mastery and masochism—what we do to our bodies, the pleasure and the pain—in service of aesthetic perfection," said Fernandes, a former dancer and the 2017 Graham Foundation performance artist-in-residence.

The Master and Form is also a kind of sculptural love affair between architecture and ballet.

On the first floor of the Madlener House, three geometric wooden devices that look like creative coat stands occupy the foyer and two galleries. With Fernandes acting as ballet master, the dancers move repeatedly in and out of iconic poses, using the sculptures as guides to attain a more perfect form.

On the second floor, three large-scale installations made of black metal piping occupy the east and west galleries. They resemble a cross between scaffolding and a pilates reformer. On these structures, dancers will bend their bodies into extreme postures and forms, stretching the limits of their strength and flexibility. The west gallery is also hung with pieces of thick rope, which serve as BDSM-style endurance devices for the dancers to hold onto with their arms overextended while moving between ballet positions on pointe, to the point of fatigue.

These performances are meant to elicit an intense intimacy between the dancers and the objects, as well as between the dancers and the audience, who will be standing close enough to hear them breathe and see them sweat.

When the dancers are not present, three-way audio recordings of their movements will play in each room. Ellen Alderman, Managing Director of Public Programs at the Graham Foundation, said, "Sounds of pointe shoes moving across the old oak floor, creaks, the dancers breathing heavily, will elicit an experience of the physicality of the sculptures and the choreography that will draw the audience to their own bodies and experience of the space."

In addition to the sculptural instruments, Fernandes and Norman Kelley also designed a series of gestural arches and frames that echo existing and historical thresholds and windows in the Madlener House. These moments call attention to architecture's most intimate moments in relation to the human body, and serve as another layer of sculptural circulation influencing the movement of bodies through the house.

Performances are scheduled for four dates throughout the duration of the exhibition, including the opening reception. The exhibition closes on March 10.