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Chicago Tribune

Artist and choreographer Brendan Fernandes nails all the right moves as he makes Chicago his home



Brendan Fernandes with his piece, "From Hiz Hands," at the DePaul Art Museum in Chicago. The show, "Brendan Fernandes: The Living Mask" opens Sept. 6. (Erin Hooley/Chicago Tribune)

KT Hawbaker

Chicago Tribune

Two years ago at EXPO Chicago, artist Brendan Fernandes found himself virtually alone in a new city and walking the art fair on his own.

“It was September. I remember taking a cab by myself to EXPO and thinking, 'This is an art event, and I don't know anybody. What have I done?'" he recalls. After more than a decade of living in New York, Fernandes picked up his career — ballet shoes, sculpture and all — and moved to Chicago for a two-year residency at Northwestern. “It was like, ‘Oh, my god, I'm in my late 30s. I'm leaving the place that I spent so much time in. I'm starting from new.'”

This time around, EXPO looks a little friendlier.

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“I’m doing a number of performances at Monique Meloche’s booth, I’m doing a solo booth with DePaul Art Museum, I’m giving a talk with Sarah Thornton,” Fernandes says, running down a long schedule that requires every bit of a dancer’s stamina. The former ballet dancer is regarded for his work that stands (and pivots and stomps) at the intersections of visual art, dance and postcolonial theory.

Earlier this year, his solo show at the Graham Foundation, “The Master and Form,” brought Joffrey Academy ballerinas into the arena of architecture through performances of sculptural endurance. That same media-defying instinct will be on exhibit at the DePaul Art Museum, when Fernandes opens “The Living Mask” on Sept. 6. In the three-room curation, the artist shows work from the past decade — photographs, steel sculptures, dance, neon, and more — alongside wooden masks from DPAM’s African collection.

“This show looks at the post-colonial narrative of dance through the masked object and how these were all dance, they were all performed,” Fernandes explains. He says his work aims to give the body back to objects such as these masks, ripped from their context and displayed in Western museums.

It’s a show rooted in Fernandes’ personal history. Born in Nairobi, Kenya, to parents of Indian descent, Fernandes immigrated with his family to Canada when he was 9 to escape political instability. He was raised on punk rock and ballet in the suburbs of Toronto, paying for Riot Grrrl zines and dance lessons with money he earned waiting tables at Wally B. World, an eatery similarly themed to Chuck E. Cheese. He then double-majored in a dance and visual arts at Toronto’s York University, where he suffered a career-altering injury toward the end of his education.



Brendan Fernandes' sculptures, Stand Tall I-IV, and several photographs from his "As One" series on display at the DePaul Art Museum in Chicago. "Brendan Fernandes: The Living Mask" opens Sept. 6. (Erin Hooley/Chicago Tribune)

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“I was just so mentally, physically and emotionally broken. I just stopped and didn’t talk about dance for a long period of time,” he says.

Unsure of whether or not he would return to the stage, Fernandes then enrolled in an MFA program at the University of Western Ontario, earning a spot at the Whitney Museum’s Independent Study Program upon graduation.

“I moved to New York and worked as a full-time artist. I rarely did other jobs, I just really focused on my career and worked hard and hustled,” he says.

“I started to watch dance again and remember thinking, ‘Dance, huh. I kind of like you again, but I’m not going to trust you right away.’ I encountered Yvonne Rainer when I was at the Whitney and she reintroduced me to the form. I started to make work with bodies, using dancers but never using my own body, because I was feeling insecure — I was feeling old and injured.”

Fernandes’ grind eventually led him to a three-month Alice Kaplan fellowship at Northwestern, where he was invited to respond to the Block Museum’s ["A Feast of Astonishments: Charlotte Moorman and the Avant-Garde, 1960s-1980s."](#)

They liked him so much that they invited him to apply for a two-year residency, which is how Chicago won him over. Now, with a new condo in Boystown and a faculty position at Northwestern, Fernandes is ready to call Chicago home.

“I think as artists we’re made to think that our work should be nomadic, that our work is something that should always be in flux or transition. At certain times, that’s a good thing, because it allows us to think and be constantly challenged, but we also deserve stability,” he says.

“New York is its own beast, and I love that beast, but Chicago is more caring and nurturing. It’s allowed me to value my things. In New York, I would just do it. Here, I can do it, stop, think, appreciate and value those things that I’ve done. It’s given me things that I wouldn’t have been able to do.”

Don’t get it twisted, though — Fernandes is still a punk rock ballerina propelled by a queer, political ethos.

“With all of this, I have to stay humble. I still have to make my work,” he says. “I do this to think about social solidarity, to think about marginalized groups, to think about generosity and kindness.”

“I am an activist. We’re in precarious times, and I want to use my work to break down the hegemony of capitalism while thinking about other models of social-political living.”

For Fernandes, art is about movement in every sense of the word.