

## BROOKLYN RAIL

### Brendan Fernandes: *The Living Mask*

by *Lori Waxman*

DEPAUL ART MUSEUM | SEPTEMBER 6 – DECEMBER 16, 2018



Installation view, Brendan Fernandes: *The Living Mask*, DePaul Art Museum. Courtesy DePaul Art Museum. Photo: Elyse Bluestone.

*The Living Mask*, the title of Brendan Fernandes's solo exhibition at the DePaul Art Museum (DPAM) in Chicago, prompts the question: What is a dead mask?

The answer can be found amid the vast hoards of African art and artifacts owned by museums and private individuals throughout Europe and North America—collections with origins in the conquest and colonization of the African continent. Starting in the 1870s, hundreds of thousands of masks, reliefs, beadwork, vessels, garments, tusks, and other objects were seized by invaders and shipped home to be displayed first as curiosities, then as ethnographic specimens, and finally as fine art. These treasures include the Benin Bronzes, a thousand-plus series of metal plaques of astonishing figuration that for centuries decorated the royal palace of the kingdom of Benin and which, since a punitive expedition by British forces in 1897, have been dispersed to a dozen Western institutions, from the British Museum to the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art.

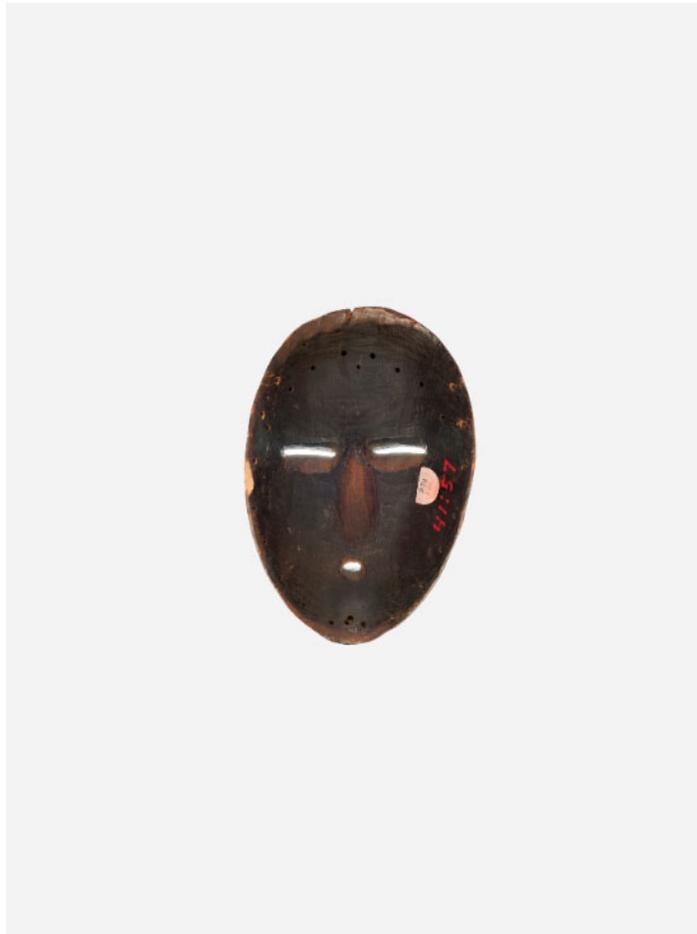
# moniquemeloche

451 N Paulina Street, Chicago 60622  
312 243 2129 moniquemeloche.com

They include, as well, the nine masks on view in Fernandes's show, objects which belong to the DPAM collection and which hail from Burkina Faso, Congo, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria. They are stunning—especially an exuberant raffia-maned creation featuring a little goat head and a set of multi-tiered stovepipe hats. Looking at them today as sculptures gives truth to the powerful if purely aesthetic influence of such masks on Picasso, Matisse, Man Ray, and so many modern artists.

The rest of Fernandes's show gives the lie to that history and the colonial thievery and cultural misappropriation upon which it depends.

Lacking meaningful didactics—their dates of creation are unknown, as are their makers and purposes, absences that are both typical of African art collections and evidence of the wholesale way in which these objects were amassed—the DPAM masks have no possibility of being understood. What they have instead, what Fernandes extends to them through an array of practices including classical ballet and metal sculpture, are resuscitation, recuperation, and repentance.



Brendan Fernandes, *Insiders III*, 2017. Digital print, 30 × 22 inches. Courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

# moniquemeloche

451 N Paulina Street, Chicago 60622  
312 243 2129 moniquemeloche.com

The most uncanny of these offerings is the “Insiders” series. Fernandes means it literally: he has photographed nine masks from the Cravens World Collection of the University of Buffalo Art Galleries against a stark white background, and from the reverse, picturing the side of the mask that is normally hidden. (Even, I suppose, from the person wearing it. You can’t see the inside of a mask when you have it on.) What’s it like in there? A bit dark and scary, actually, and a whole lot mysterious. A roughly hewn wooden oval with a pointy chin seems featureless at first but soon reveals deep expression, terrifying dents, fierce silence. Eye and mouth slits glow.

Is this the mask’s point of view, and is the mask offended by that stupid label some registrar stuck on the underside of the bridge of its nose?

Three of the masks from “Insiders” reappear in the photographs of “As One,” where each takes a turn in a pas de deux with a Caucasian dancer from the American Ballet Theatre. Perfect poses are held, odd shadows cast, bodies fragmented, and the masks are seen from all sides. Everything has a plinth. The large black-and-white images, printed in a silvery tone that makes them look the part of the modernist photography to which they refer, perform many tender reversals: ballerina bows en pointe to a fiercely elegant mask of the Baule people, both lean and elongated and coiffed with tight high buns; danceur holds his legs stiffly aloft, upper body obscured, the only visage present is that of a somber and ghostly Lega mask. It isn’t as if an equivalence is being suggested, not exactly—if anything the masks come out on top—but testament is given to a history of objectification, of rigorous formal idealization, of sacrifice and training that, if not quite shared, is nevertheless much more than coincidental.



Installation view, Brendan Fernandes: *The Living Mask*, DePaul Art Museum. Courtesy DePaul Art Museum. Photo: Elyse Bluestone.

# moniquemeloche

451 N Paulina Street, Chicago 60622  
312 243 2129 [moniquemeloche.com](http://moniquemeloche.com)

Fernandes comes by his application of classical ballet to fine art honestly. Born in Kenya in 1979 to immigrant parents from India, he began studying dance at age nine when the family moved to Canada. Badly injured during college, he stopped dancing and went on to earn an MFA and a post-grad spot in the Whitney ISP. He moved to Chicago from New York two years ago to become the artist-in-residence at Northwestern University.

There is other work. Funky neon masks which blink a Morse code message in the front windows; a disappointingly clunky video of a visit to a morgue-like African art storage vault at Queens University in Ontario; wiry black steel sculptures which resemble ballet stick figures but are in fact based on mask display stands. These last would be cute were they small—sized as they are, larger-than-life, they loom, threatening to capture a visitor and put her on display. Here's hoping we can dance together instead.