

DOCUMENT

Brendan Fernandes reinterprets Isamu Noguchi and Martha Graham's 'strange beauty'

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The Kenyan-born artist and choreographer on 'Contract and Release,' the performance he choreographed for The Noguchi Museum.

Choreographer Martha Graham and artist and designer Isamu Noguchi first saw their work come together in 1935, when Noguchi envisioned Graham's idea of what she called "a journey into the unknown," based on a train trip to California as two ropes in a V formation for her dance *Frontier*. She referred to this minimalist set in a [1989 obituary she wrote for Noguchi in *The New York Times*](#) as "the tracks now the endless ropes into the future." Their collaborative work would go until Noguchi's death in 1988. "From the first, there was an unspoken language between Isamu Noguchi and me," she wrote in the obituary. "Our working together might have as its genesis a myth, a legend, a piece of poetry, but there always emerged for me from Isamu something of a strange beauty and an otherworldliness."

Now, choreographer, dancer, and artist [Brendan Fernandes](#) is bringing Graham and Nocuchi's collaborative process into the present with *Contract and Release*, a performance-based collaboration that runs at The Noguchi Museum in Long Island City, New York, through March 8, 2020. With an installation by Norman Kelley, chair fabrication by Jason Lewis, and costumes by Rad Hourani, the

performance, conceived of by Fernandes, entails a group of three dancers holding pieces designed by Noguchi, performing in the Graham technique, using her iconic method of contracting and releasing muscles as a form of dance. They move through the four main galleries on the museum's second floor, fusing the work of Noguchi, Graham, and Fernandes together—something that would have most likely come with the blessing of the late Noguchi and Graham, who passed away in 1991, as both reveled in the act of creative collaboration. Document spoke to Fernandes about the performance, which comes off the heels of his participation in the 2019 Whitney Biennial, and a current exhibition *Restrain*, through December 21 at Monique Meloche in Chicago. Fernandes discussed the influence of Graham and Noguchi in his work, working with Noguchi's sculptures, and the labor and technique behind the performance.

Ann Binlot—How did you first come across the work of Noguchi? Do you remember?

Brendan Fernandes—I have always been a fan of Noguchi's work; I have always been a fan of his design, his askari lamps, and his furniture design. But then, as a dancer working with Martha Graham you understand the sets and props that he made. More in my later years as a dancer, I understood him through Martha Graham, the collaborations they did.

Ann—Did you ever have the opportunity to dance on one of his sets? I know it was a long time ago.

Brendan—No, I never had the opportunity. Some of the images that are at the Noguchi museum right now are quintessential images that have become iconic visuals. So even with my dancers now, having them work in the sets at first they were like, 'Oh my god,' because we are in royal ground in a way; we are working in these amazing iconic sets, devices, things that he did for Martha Graham, so it's quite a special intimate moment.

Ann—Did you watch any of the videos?

Brendan—There's a lot of videos; Martha Graham was a very informative woman, very strong and would always kind of talk to herself in the mirror. But for all my dancers, they all have Graham technique. They're not Graham dancers in the sense that they dance in the Martha Graham company, but they all have the sort of technique. So we were all revisiting and trying to remember things in our bodies, so we started to watch a lot of Graham videos, and a lot of them are watching Graham dances.

“These three dancers, dancing together, need each other, so it becomes this very collaborative generous social space.”

Ann—How did you cast the dancers?

Brendan—Whenever I cast my dancers, it's with people that I have worked with before, but I wanted them to have modern training. So one of the first questions was, *Do you have Graham technique?* With The Whitney piece, it was like, *Do you have ballet technique?* They had to be ballet dancers. When I was dancing ballet, I left ballet to go dance Martha Graham, so I could teach my body a new way of moving.

Ann—Could you explain to somebody who isn't necessarily familiar with her technique how it differs from everything else? What makes it the Martha Graham technique?

Brendan— Ballet was seen as the only form of dance for a long period of time. Graham went against ballet. She was like, 'I'm gonna change the way that we make dance.' It was all about taking off your shoes, there were no pointe shoes, so you were barefoot. In ballet, you dance en pointe. In ballet you turn at your hips, in Graham, you dance in parallel; your hair is down. But Graham is a very strict technique, and it is all about contracting. You contract your muscles, your core,

and you let it go so that's the release. One of the main forms of the technique is to contract and release. So hence the show is called *Contract and Release*.

Ann—How did you get invited to do this show?

Brendan—I have just been a fan of Noguchi, visited the museum a lot, and started a conversation with Dakin [Hart], the chief curator. Then when *The Master and Form* was coming about with the Graham Foundation, we started thinking about what [the collaboration] would be, maybe *The Master and Form* would come to The Noguchi. But then I was like, no. [With] the details of my specificity with Graham and my love of Noguchi, I was like, I have to make a new work. So this new piece has come out, so it's almost *The Master and Form's* second chapter, but it's looking at it through Martha Graham technique and the collaborations with Noguchi.

Ann—Tell me about the concept for this performance. Because you used the Noguchi works, they're very much another character.

Brendan—In *Master and Form*, there are new devices, and the device is based on a rocking chair that Noguchi made for Martha Graham for the set of *Appalachian Spring*. In this piece he makes this rocking chair but it doesn't function, it doesn't rock. So I have worked in collaboration with Norman Kelly Architects to create a new version of this chair that is very primitive, very obstetric, kind of wicked. And this chair now physically rocks. Noguchi based it on a West African stool, so it has that African icon feel, which also is apart of my work, being African. And so now the dancers have to set the chairs and do quintessential, technical feet of Graham, but one of the caveats of the choreography is that they can't make it rock. So in the contraction of holding their abs together, holding their body together, they have to hold a position, but not let the chair rock. So the chair is now made to be still again. This question of moving and not moving. And of course, they have to do it a certain amount of times because it is so hard on their body. We were rehearsing

for the last couple of days and today some of the dancers were like, 'Oh my god my hip flexors really hurt from being in that position,' or 'My abs, I'm getting washboard abs from working so hard.' The labor of the dancer is really being challenged.

"There's a lot of fun for them because there's a task to build the Noguchi sculptures, there's a task to play on the big red sculpture, and then they're like, *this is kind of fun, I have freedom, I have an agency in making choices and decisions in what I do*, and that's very important."

Ann—Doesn't the performance have very much to do with spatial awareness and space as well?

Brendan—Yep, because we're always in a space [where] there are so many objects so my objects are intervening with Noguchi's objects. Noguchi made a lot of objects called Body-Space Devices, things that he made because he wanted bodies to interact with the sculpture. That's what I do as a choreographer and a maker: I want my dancers to, I want my audience to, interact with objects and sculptures. So there are a number of his objects that are being used as well. In the choreography, there are moments where they are working and exercising and challenging their labor on these rocking chairs that I have made, and then there are other moments, I call the assembly time, where they assemble the Noguchi pieces.

Ann—Is that what they were holding?

Brendan—Yeah.

Ann—The puzzle pieces.

Brendan— Those shapes were based on biomorphic forms that Noguchi based on dancers.

Ann—Oh interesting, it's like...

Brendan— ...Full circle.

Ann—Right, it's all related. What kind of access did the museum give you to the collection? What did they tell you?

Brendan—They gave me so much. It's such an amazing museum and Dakin, the senior curator, knows so much about Noguchi. Just spending so much time with him and talking to him, I kept on learning these little anecdotes, these little stories, which makes it so much more personal. I feel like we're now also, my intervention in this space, is also creating a new narrative which is so interesting.

Ann—What were the most interesting things that you learned about the artist and designer?

Brendan—Well, with assembly sculpture, all of the assembled pieces have like maquette, and the staff has to rehearse how to put the maquettes together before they actually put the real one together because they are so fragile. I thought that's so interesting because that's choreography. That's a choreographic gesture. I started to know that becomes part of my dance now; the dancers have to put together the sculptures. There's a sculpture called *Strange Bird*, and it's a piece that we put together, but then Dakin was like, 'You know this is Noguchi's self-portrait.'

Ann—Oh interesting.

Brendan—I was like, 'What do you mean?' and he was like, 'This is his abstract portrait, here's his combover.' I just kind of loved learning all these little stories. Martha Graham and Noguchi are iconic people in my world, just to have this close proximity, this intimacy, this allowance is really amazing.

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Ann—Yeah, it’s almost like you are interacting with his ghost.

Brendan—It’s funny because he kind of looks like me, a little short bald man.

Ann—What is it like working with the dancers to choreograph this piece?

Brendan—It’s amazing. I give them proposals, I give them tasks, I give them choreographic gestures, and they just pick it up so quickly. But also there’s a lot of fun for them because there’s a task to build the Noguchi sculptures, there’s a task to play on the big red sculpture, and then they’re like, *this is kind of fun, I have freedom, I have an agency in making choices and decisions in what I do*, and that’s very important.

Ann—And how would you like the audience to interact with the performance?

Brendan—I think the audience will interact when the performers are moving, so they will follow them or try to find them. Also, if they’re in the way, the dancer will move towards them and they will move away, so there’s an interesting challenge. I also think that the audience is just going to be watching. They choreograph in some certain way because they will be moving in and out of the space, but also just watching.

Ann—What do you hope they take away from the performance?

Brendan—To see the labor, to see the mastery of the form of a different technique, to see the challenges, to see a dancer doing beautiful things but seeing how difficult that is, to also see them moving in such beautiful ways in collaboration, in solidarity, because sometimes when they are putting the sculpture together they

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need all three of them holding it or it will fall apart. These three dancers, dancing together, need each other, so it becomes this very collaborative generous social space.