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 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

## Brendan Fernandes *Contract and Release*

By **Avram C. Alpert**



Brendan Fernandes: *Contract and Release*. Photo: Nicholas Knight. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, NY / ARS.

ON VIEW

### **The Noguchi Museum**

Sep 11, 2019 – Mar 8, 2020

New York

*Contract and Release*, which develops out of Noguchi's collaborations with Martha Graham, takes the series in a slightly new direction. In the piece, performed twice on most Saturday afternoons, three dancers clad in white, gray, and black slowly emerge into the museum, recreating both the initial movement and set design of Graham's *Appalachian Spring* (1944). Working with fabricator Jason Lewis, Fernandes has created multiples of a minimalist rocking chair from the original ballet. The dancers each drag one of these through the space, gracefully weaving around visitors, some of whom, like me, scurry to get out of the way.

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Now separated into different rooms, the dancers begin to dance on the chairs. The viewer of the piece is confronted with a choice of which performer to follow as a total vision of the dance becomes impossible. This dispersal of the united three into fragments forms a leitmotif of the performance, raising questions about the limits of vision, who gets noticed in a division of labor, and the distribution of art objects through both commodification and theft.

This latter point is underscored in the dance's next movement, when the three dancers re-unite in front of a wall of white sculpture fragments. With slow, thoughtful gazes that seem like re-appropriations of Man Ray's *Kiki with African Mask* (1926), the dancers present the fragments to the audience. Then they assemble the white fragment pieces into a sculpture that matches a pre-assembled black one next to it. Once completed, the dancers return to their chairs. In a final movement, they reassemble and begin to lounge on a large, circular sculpture, striking in its bright red color among the otherwise muted rusts, greys, and off-whites that dominate Noguchi's palate.

Each performance is just under an hour and performed exquisitely slowly on a Saturday afternoon for whomever happens to be in the museum. Still, most visitors seem to stay through the entire performance. There is something captivating about the slowness of the movements, just as there is something captivating about the subtleties of Noguchi's sculpture. And like the latter's art, Fernandes's simple choreography has an air of openness. It does not demand response—it lets your attention come and go but always gently pulls you back in to reconsider it from another angle.



Brendan Fernandes: *Contract and Release*. Photo: Nicholas Knight. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, NY / ARS.

I detect a strong Marxism underlying the work, moving from the struggle of black and white to a resolved dialectic in red. Their work completed, the performers lounge on the sculpture, rather than dragging and assembling it. Such subtle resistance matches again with Noguchi, who, curator Dakin Hart reminds visitors, “was a social activist...most of [whose] efforts to shape society were indirect and abstract.” And part of what makes Fernandes’s subtle intervention in the space so engaging is its reactivation of this aspect of Noguchi, easily overlooked in the intense beauty of his work and the former atelier that now houses it.

Like the indirectness of Noguchi’s sculpture, I also detect something more than a resolute dialectic in *Contract and Release*. Watching it, and watching my mind wander as I watched it, I was reminded of John Cage’s famous saying, “There is no such thing as silence.” Even in the anechoic chamber, Cage found, he could still hear his heart beat and his neurons fire. And as I watched the dancers try to hold another impossible pose and succumb to the inevitable wobble of strained muscles, I thought to myself, “There is no such thing as stillness.” There is always movement.

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Here again are the fragments, the impossibility of totality, the refusal of the closed archive of the museum. In times like these, where disruption has become synonymous with inequality and failure, one grows tired of such refusal of closure and nostalgic for the end of history, for the possibility of rest and stillness. As the dancers lounge on their bright red sculpture, I feel a pinch of this desire for calmer days. But then their legs twitch, their muscles spasm, the corns on the bottoms of their feet show. And I am reminded that my desire matters very little for the resoluteness of the world. Whatever I might will, *eppur si muove*. Unable to sit still, we carry on the scripts of culture, just like these dancers. But at least there are moments of rest, moments of hope, moments when we can pause to question how our parts have been written, if only for an hour.