

sculpture



Brendan Fernandes

January 10, 2020 by [Gabrielle Gopinath](#)
Chicago

Brendan Fernandes's new works cast bondage in bronze. His current exhibition, "Restrain" ([on view](#) through January 11, 2020), features bronze coils suspended by leather straps from live-edge walnut supports. Titles inject context, connecting these looping suspensions to the formations of *kinbaku*, or "tight binding," the Japanese practice of aestheticized bondage. Screenprints titled *Stud* feature studs shaped like tiny chrome balls, pillows, or bullets arranged in formation around a central void, looking as if a biker jacket had been deconstructed and re-imagined on a two-dimensional plane.

The Chicago-based artist, who trained as a ballet dancer, frames this body of work as a return to his disciplinary roots. In *Contract and Release*, his multimedia collaboration taking place concurrently at the Noguchi Museum in Long Island City, Queens (the last performance is scheduled for March 7, 2020), dancers physically interact with custom-crafted wooden benches and supports. Here, the bodies have left the building. Bronze ropes coiling in space memorialize their absence.

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Blow-up sex dolls supported the bindings throughout the early stages of the lost-wax casting process, I was told. These origins inform the works' uncanny scale, which offers a frisson of estrangement. (The sequenced coils of *Kinbaku Leg* would better fit the average American arm, and other absent body parts also seem smaller than anticipated.)

As the sculptures hang inert from black leather straps, their evident weight accentuates the airy emptiness at their core. The bodies that once filled these bonds have pulled a Houdini caper, escaping the snares that were laid for them. A weird transfer is completed via this vanishing act: the bodies themselves burn out, the heft and mass they once possessed now transferred to the bonds that formerly constrained them.

Suspended in white gallery space, these reiterated forms have a graphic effect. They come across as drawings as much as sculptures from the middle distance; while scrolling on a screen, the thumbnails look like Sharpie hieroglyphs. Up close, the works' materiality asserts itself. The casting process delivers a lot of detail; you can tell that the rope was three-strand jute, traditionally used in *kinbaku*.

Fernandes's kinky suspensions are shadowed by histories of inequality and racialized violence. In America, when black not-bodies hang suspended from trees, the bay of the mob and the shadow of the gallows are never far from mind. Allusions to the queer BDSM community suggest a parallel line of interpretation, one in which the staging of bondage can lead members of marginalized communities to a renewed experience of agency and control.

Nobuyoshi Araki, the photographer whose best-known work involves *kinbaku*, has romanticized the practice as an act of substitution or displacement, saying of the women who model for him: "Since I can't tie up their hearts, I tie their bodies instead." Fernandes's work refuses pat equivalencies by insisting that bodily entanglements are complex in their own right, shadowed as they inevitably are with foreknowledge of loss.