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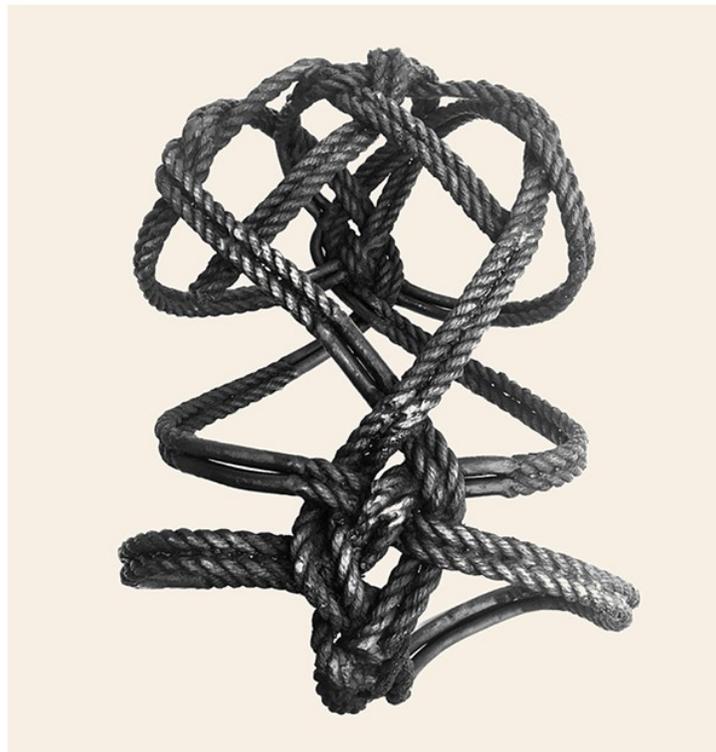
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READER

'Restrain' appears static, but the works (and the viewers) dance

Brendan Fernandes's bronze sculptures congeal pain and pleasure.

By S. Nicole Lane @snicolelane



Brendan Fernandes's bronze rope sculpture

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MONIQUE MELOCHE GALLERY, CHICAGO

"Restrain"

Through 1/11, gallery hours Tue-Sat 11 AM-6 PM, Mon-Sun closed, Monique Meloche Gallery, 451 N. Paulina, moniquemeloche.com, free.

Artist [Brendan Fernandes](#) has been having conversations about ballet and mastery within his work for years. The call and response interaction focuses on the idea that ballet is tied to the process of perfection. It can be difficult for ballet dancers to let go and let loose. It's endurance, labor, and an intense effort for the body to stretch, hold, and pose. The body is challenged to push through any sort

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of pain to gain a reward. Ballet demands the body to do more, to be better. Fernandes finds the kinds of demands in another of his interests—BDSM. Dance and BDSM derive from the same formula: discipline, rigor, and authority.

"In ballet we learn and are molded by our teachers who we call 'masters,'" Fernandes says. "Ballet is its own form of fetish and kink, with its own sets of rules. We challenge and change our bodies to perform acts of fortitude and show no effort in doing so. In part this is the fetish, the role of the body and how it acts while dancing."

The Kenyan and Indian artist grew up in Toronto and now splits his time between New York City and Chicago. His work has been shown at [the Whitney Biennial](#), the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the New York City AIDS Memorial, and the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) here in Chicago. A former dancer, Fernandes conflates his experiences with ballet, queer identity, and BDSM through installation, video, performance, and sculpture. His performance-based work at the MCA, "A Call and Response," which closed in October, centered on how we react to one another in a space and how visibility is challenged by the presence of others.

Fernandes's interest in the idea of masters and hierarchies, dominance and subordination, within the worlds of BDSM and ballet are on my mind as I walk throughout the space. We have our ballet master. We have our master in the dungeon. Both imply masochism, whether you're tied up in rope or tied up in pointe shoes.

It's interesting then that Fernandes's work in "Restrain," now at Monique Meloche Gallery, eliminates the physical body—absent of dancers, what's left behind are bronze rope sculptures seemingly wrapped around an invisible figure. Hanging on walnut structures, the pieces encapsulate an emptiness and form a shape with no clear molding. The artist contours the body into the shape of *Shibari*, often called *kinbaku* or rope bondage. This technique originated from martial arts in Japan and uses a fiber rope that wraps into several patterns around a person to, well, restrain them. "My choice to remove the body in this work is mainly to instill a sense of fragility but also to find strength," he says. "By making the body one that is not identified to one type of person, it can be read by all. I aim to find solidarity for all and in that I define 'queer' as an open moniker for self-inclusion. The missing body is a space for all to see themselves in and to find empowerment."

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In "Restrain," Fernandes works with leather, walnut, bronze, and steel to create stand-alone sculptures. With the piece *Kinbaku Arm*, the artist created a bronze sculpture with a vertical walnut base. This piece is the most stimulating—it features a rope technique that is situated around the arm creating a coil-like shape. The support creates a sense of height within the exhibition space.

"This show is different in that I specially chose to leave out the moving, live, and dancing body," Fernandes says. He adds that he wants the "audience to be the body that is now activating the space and work." Even though there appears to be no live component in this show, visitors who move through the space are participating in a performance. "For me this is still a form of dancing and choreography," he says.

Although "Restrain" eliminates traditional choreography and trained dancers, the hanging works and artist renderings still seem to dance. The Shibari rope harnesses are stagnant and rigid, yet their bodily structures suggest movement. I make circles around each piece, gliding between them, even standing on my tiptoes to get a better view.

Fernandes's work is known to break the standards of what we expect to see in a museum space. In "Restrain," we are unknowingly a part of the artist's performance as we trace our steps around each sculpture and activate the space. Are we the dominant or the submissive? What are the hierarchies between the viewer and the artist? Here, artwork itself is the master. Being an obedient submissive is an obsession toward perfection, and in "Restrain" the works hang with confidence. The viewers can't help but admire the sculptures' shape and excellence as we waltz together under their overarching authority. v