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Brendan Fernandes

An interview about rigid discipline and supple bodies.

Brendan Fernandes is a multimedia artist with the mind—and the body—of a dancer. Not surprisingly, he studied ballet as a teenager and modern dance in college before settling on a career as a visual artist. A Kenyan-Indian-Canadian, his 2008 video *Foe* saw him trying to speak the accents of his various ancestral languages and was exhibited at New York's Guggenheim Museum. His latest piece, *The Master and Form*, is part homage to, part damning critique of, the classical ballet world of his childhood. The installation and performance series, presented in collaboration with the designer Norman Kelley at the Graham Foundation in Chicago, explores "themes of mastery and discipline within the culture of ballet." Performers dance around scaffolding intended to help them push their bodies to new limits, whereas Fernandes, now 38, assumes the symbolically loaded position of the highly disciplinary ballet master.

You were a ballet dancer as a teenager. Why didn't you stick with it? I started doing community ballet at 12 years old and eventually started taking classes with the national ballet. But I was never actually enrolled in the school; my family didn't have the resources. In those classes I was already feeling scrutinized: My feet were too flat,

they criticized my neck, etcetera. But I was really flexible and had long legs so they were like, "You should go to modern [dance]." I studied modern in college, but I was always doing visual arts. I remember thinking to myself, "How will I do both of these?"

In the end, you embarked on a career as a visual artist. How did you find your way back to dance? In 2009, I did my first piece working with dancers. It was called *Encomium* and I was looking at the queer body and thinking about the idea of brokenness. It's based on Plato's *Symposium* where Phaedrus says that love is asymmetrical: You'll never fully fulfill love, it will always break apart. I talked about that as a metaphor for love but also for this breaking of the body, as it falls out of this love relationship with dance.

Your latest piece focused on the power dynamics within ballet, and the rigidity of the form. Where did that interest come from? There's a history in visual arts that teaches critical thinking: People are making political commentary, writing about the world. With dancers, we're not allowed to be critical. For me, there's a power dynamic that's not talked about within ballet—I mean, we call our teachers "master."

You seem drawn to the image of the ballet master as an emblem of control. I learned my dedication and discipline as an artist and person through dance. You have these things that put you in perfect positions that are almost torturous—reminiscent of devices that were used in colonial inquisitions—but they're also, you know, somewhat kinky because there's the sense of pleasure and pain. I remember dancing once, and I had dropped something on my toe beforehand—I definitely had broken it and the toenail had fallen off. I just taped it and went and danced the whole performance. It felt amazing. The resilience and threshold of pain that a dancer has is phenomenal.

Why cast a critical eye on an art form which you also obviously revere? Critical yes, but I'm searching for ways of newness within that. That's why I call these art spaces "queer" because there are many possibilities. I didn't become a ballet dancer, but ballet has opened my artistic perspective. It's part of my culture and as artists we represent our culture through our work. I'm fifth-generation Kenyan-born, but Indian with a Portuguese last name. That's my identity, but there is ballet, punk, rock music... those subcultures formed who I am.

