

Studio Visit

by Dana Liss,
Communications Coordinator



In his recent works, sculptor and performance artist Brendan Fernandes mines his background in dance to explore complex ideas about beauty, sexuality, labor and identity. Born in Kenya, of Indian descent and raised in Canada from the age of ten, the New York-based artist studied ballet and modern technique for more than a decade, but was forced to retire from dance in 2002 due to an injury—a “painful breakup,” Fernandes calls it. He shifted his focus to visual art and earned an MFA from the University of Western Ontario in 2005. In 2011, Fernandes returned to dance, after a nine-year hiatus, through choreography in performance-art pieces.

Brendan Fernandes
Standing Leg (performance view), 2015
Courtesy KWJAG - Kitchener-Waterloo Art
Gallery, Kitchener, Canada
Photo: Felix Chan

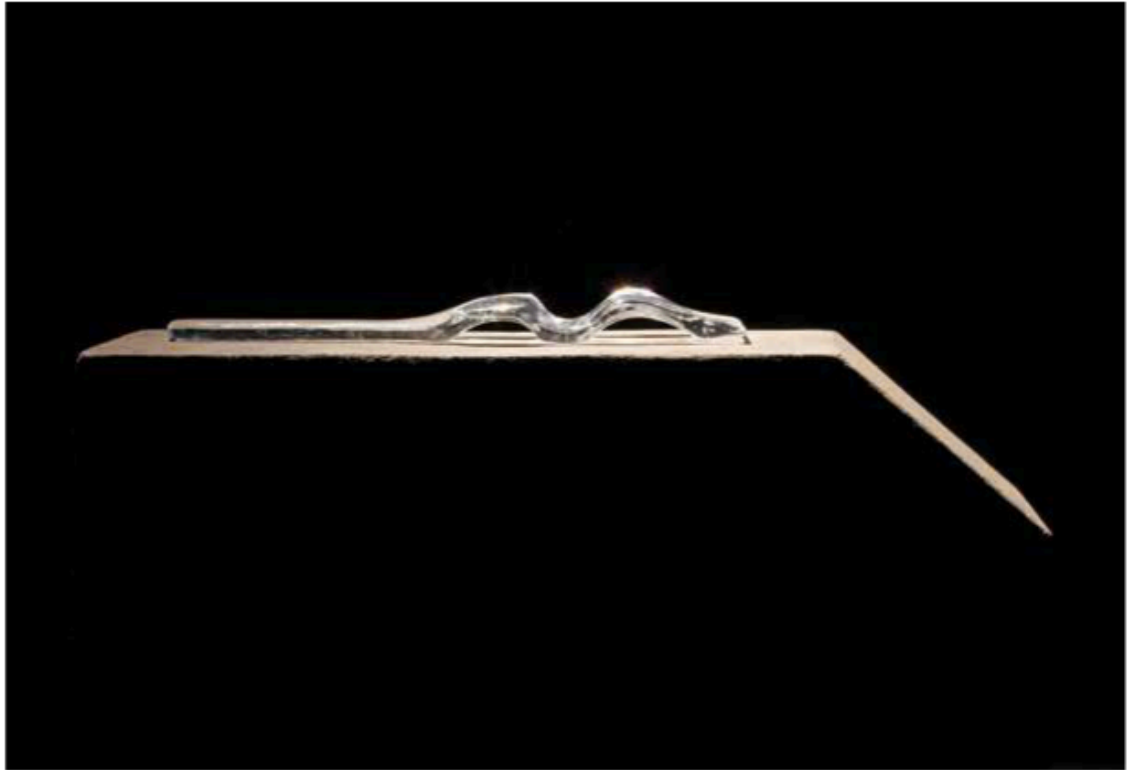
Brendan Fernandes

The first of these works is a performance titled *Encomium* (2011), inspired by a scene in Plato’s “Symposium” in which interlocutor Phaedrus suggests that love is asymmetrical. Using the physical language of classical ballet, *Encomium* explores the love between two men. A 2012 performance and photographic project *The Working Move* at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam furthered Fernandes’s exploration of intersections between avant-garde dance and sculpture. For the performance, a group of five male and female dancers rehearsed a series of ballet strength and endurance exercises using sculptural plinths as both sets and supports. These functional structures, which are used by museums to display art, suggest the status of the human body (as well as its labor) as commodity or object.

In his 2014 performance *Standing Leg*, Fernandes, now as performer, enacts the bodily and mental struggles experienced by dancers as they strive for ballet’s physical ideals. In the performance, the artist strains to mold his foot on a ballet foot stretcher, a tool used by dancers to manipulate anatomy to achieve perfectly formed arches. It was personally significant for him to perform this work because, as a dancer, he faced criticism about his feet. To witness, Fernandes says in his artist’s statement, “how a dancer will accept and take on pain where they succumb to aesthetic desires defined by dance technique itself,” is, surely, an uncomfortable position for viewers to inhabit. Fernandes performed and recorded *Standing Leg* alongside sculptures he made for the exhibition *The Foot Made* at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery in Ontario in 2015. To make these sculptures, Fernandes made foot stretchers in crystal, a material he selected for its aesthetic appeal. Lit dramatically in the gallery space, the sculptures have an erotic quality that plays on both ballet’s foot fetishism and what Walter Benjamin describes as the “aura” of an authentic artwork in his seminal 1936 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

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Currently, the artist is making and editing sound for a film exploring a collection of African objects bequeathed to the Agnes Etherington Art Center at Queens University in Canada. In this work, Fernandes highlights what he calls the “choreography” of the vault that houses the objects—the ghostly movements of the walls and shelves in museum storage facilities. The film addresses, Fernandes says, “the way these objects all had dance or active ceremonial traditions attached to them, but in the vault they rest motionless.” Parts of the film were shot by a ballet dancer, who guided the camera while walking and dancing throughout the space. Her body is not seen, but it is

understood from the wobbly camera shots. The film will be part of the solo exhibition *Brendan Fernandes: Lost Bodies* at the Agnes Etherington Art Center, on view from January 9 to April 10, 2016.

Brendan Fernandes
Mastered Form (installation view), 2015
Courtesy KWJAG - Kitchener-Waterloo Art
Gallery, Kitchener, Canada
Photo: Robert McNair