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## Blending Dance and Sculpture Creates a Fresh View of Art

An exhibition at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia is one of several recent projects using the two forms to explore how people interact with art.



Brendan Fernandes's dance piece "Returning to Before" at the Barnes Foundation is a response to William Edmondson's sculptures. Credit...Daniel Jackson for Embassy: Interactive

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Reporting from London

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The Chicago artist Brendan Fernandes doesn't need his work to fit neatly into one category. "People ask, 'Is it a prop? Is it a sculpture? Is it an artwork?' And I'm like, 'It's all those things,'" he said recently by phone.

He has now focused his longstanding interest in merging dance and sculpture on the work of the early-20th-century artist William Edmondson. Fernandes created a piece that is featured in a retrospective of Edmondson's practice, "[A Monumental Vision](#)," running through Sept. 10 at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia.

With its presentation of Fernandes's work, the Barnes joins a number of institutions and artists worldwide that are combining the mediums of dance and sculpture to question how people interact with museums and visual art. The show's curators, James Claiborne and Nancy Ireson, hoped that Fernandes's dance piece, made in response to Edmondson's stone carvings, would "encourage new ways of seeing," Ireson said. The work, "Returning to Before," will be shown as an ongoing live performance in the museum starting Friday.

Claiborne recalled hearing Fernandes give a talk at Rutgers University in 2022, in which he discussed the point at which "objects become fine art, and at what point they can be touched." Claiborne added that this incited his interest in how "museums often disconnect artworks and objects of spiritual and cultural significance from their original context" and helped him conceive of the Barnes project.

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Fernandes said "Returning to Before" was "an hourlong piece, but there are moments where the dancers become statues." They stop to think or rest, but also to mimic the positions of Edmonson's sculptures. "They are meditating," he added. "They are creating this space of peacefulness within the museum."



Dancers performed as part of the "Master and Form II" installation by Fernandes at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2019. Credit...Justin Lane/EPA, via Shutterstock

"Museums are choreographed spaces," Fernandes said, adding that choreography is "a set of rules" people follow. At the Whitney Museum in 2019, Fernandes exhibited "Master and Form II," a sculptural work of black scaffolding made into a steel cage. In performances demanding significant physical endurance, ballet dancers hung off, balanced on and leaped over parts of the structure.

"You go to a museum, you don't touch things, you don't talk," he said. In works like "Master and Form II," he was "playing with those etiquettes and transforming them," he said.

Much as Fernandes's work interacts with Edmondson's sculptures at the Barnes, the American artist Carrie Mae Weems has used dance to bring new meaning to longstanding visual work. In her 2013 video piece "Holocaust Memorial," Weems moves reverently between the pillars of the Berlin monument, "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe," clapping and swaying her arms.

There has been [much discussion](#) about how visitors interact with the memorial, which opened in 2005, including criticism of people for taking [selfies](#) or posing for other pictures among, or even on, the grid of pillars.



Carrie Mae Weems's 2013 video piece "Holocaust Memorial" on view at London's Barbican Center. Credit: Jemima Yong

Weems's movement between the memorial's objects, also caught on camera, aimed to highlight the "shared sense of struggle" between Black and Jewish communities, according to a quote from the artist in a current retrospective of her work at the Barbican Center in London. At an exhibition in Stuttgart, Germany, last year, Weems displayed still images from the "Holocaust Memorial" series for the first time.

Preceding these more recent works, the American artist Nick Cave has spent much of his career bringing dance and sculpture together. Since 1991, Cave has made more than 500 "soundsuits"—vibrant, wearable sculptures — that have been displayed at museums around the world. Cave has long thought about how different museums separate artworks from their initial purpose, he said

The soundsuits have also been worn in numerous dance pieces in art spaces, with the performers' movement in the suits producing the "sound." For Cave, the idea of sculptures in museums "lends itself to interpretation," he said. "A sculpture is something that you encounter in its full form from all sides. We move around a sculpture, we come in and out of a sculpture. In my case, one can be the wearer, or one can imagine the sculpture in a performative context."



Credit: Nick Cave, via Jack Shainman Gallery; photos by James Prinz

Much like the Barnes Foundation collaboration between Fernandes's dance and Edmondson's sculpture, Ireson said museums and galleries were looking for "fresh ways to stay relevant."

Movement puts people in "a contemplative space," Claiborne said, which can open up new ways of engaging with visual art.

He added, "Dance becomes a way that still objects take on new lives."