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## Movement towards Freedom – Brendan Fernandes at the Fabric Workshop and Museum



*Brendan Fernandes: 'In Two,' 2024. Live performance at Pulitzer Arts Foundation. Photo credit: Virginia Harold Photography. Courtesy of the Pulitzer Arts Foundation*

International artist Brendan Fernandes is a fan of Philadelphia. His nomadic practice – grounded in responsive movement – has brought him to our city several times over the past ten years. He has shown in the sweltering summer heat at GrizzlyGrizzly in 2016, carved space through the concrete expanse of Drexel's Pearlstein Gallery in 2020, and staged diaphanous dance through the Barnes Foundation's airy front gallery in 2023. Equally at home in Philly's DIY collective scene and its major cultural institutions, Fernandes has participated in the breadth and depth of the artistic possibilities here, creating more space for future collaborations with each successive visit.

Now at the Fabric Workshop and Museum (FWM), Fernandes was one of the eight artists commissioned to make new work for Soft Cover, an intergenerational group exhibition spanning the first three floors of the

gallery that reinvigorates pieces from FWM's deep archive of collaborative textile projects by introducing contemporary works by Artists-in-Residence. Fernandes's engagement began in the summer of 2024, while he was developing new work for the Pulitzer Arts Foundation that updates the navigation of gay cruising in direct dialog with a Scott Burton retrospective. In addition to the evocative tech-smudged curtains and monumental faux-stone pillows featured in *Soft Cover*, the creative exchange will inspire two new performances debuting in June.

During his most recent residency this Spring, Fernandes began creation of brightly hued costumes for three new pieces of choreography. The fabric begins as a traditional printed cloth from Kenya (where Fernandes was born) —Maasai shuka—worn by the warriors as both protection from the weather and as a bold form of camouflage for hunting (a parallel strategy as the zebras' dynamic stripes or the optical Razzle Dazzle camouflage of WWI.) Gridded in fully saturated red and blue plaid, the Maasai shuka print is further disrupted by the artist's choices—inviting vivid clashing and visual friction.

In the upcoming performances, "Noise See" and "In Two," costumed dancers—from both Philadelphia and New York—will activate curtains and soft sculptures in structured movements of hide and seek. Fernandes's choreography transforms space, breaking through barriers of audience and performer, but it also embodies a social trust. Building relationships is at the core of his creative practice, he explains the importance of this mutual work:

"My ongoing collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum is a deeply meaningful one. Working with their expert team has allowed me to expand my conceptual and material practice—creating garments and soft sculptures that push my performative work in new directions. In these uncertain times, the opportunity to make, reflect, and connect with the museum and greater Philadelphia community feels especially vital. There is real joy in these creative exchanges—something we need now more than ever."

In the spirit of this open dialog, the Fabric Workshop and Museum organized an artists' talk, deftly moderated by Sharon Hayes in March. In the hour-long, insightful discussion, Hayes introduced the conditional framework of freedom laid out by author, Timothy Snyder; its five requirements being sovereignty, unpredictability, mobility, factuality, and solidarity. Hayes posited that these requirements parallel both queer and performative action—at the core of Fernandes's interlineal practice.

Sovereignty, unpredictability, mobility, factuality, and solidarity; these core tenets could also reflect Philadelphia as it moves into an anniversary of independence. Perhaps this is why Brendan Fernandes's practice continues to resonate here, in all its forms. Ours is a city with range and possibility. From the raw to the polished, there is space here to be navigated —by bodies that matter, through labor that is recognized, during uncertain times, towards much needed progress—together.