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Noise See: Weaving Masking, Memory, and Maasai Legacy

by Lauren Berlin

Brendan Fernandes brings a searing emotional and political intelligence to *Noise See*, a 60-minute, musicless meditation on visibility and the psychological cost of masking—particularly for queer, multinational bodies navigating colonial legacies and modern opacity. With dynamic movement and symbolic costume design, *Noise See* compels viewers to consider how identity is—much like the fabric itself, layered, multifaceted, and always in motion.

The Fabric Workshop and Museum (FWM) presents *Noise See and In Two*, two new performance works by Fernandes, the Kenya-born, Chicago-based choreographer and visual artist whose hybrid practice interrogates identity, power, and presence. Fernandes' work unfolds as simultaneous duets throughout FWM's second and eighth floor galleries, a somatic interplay woven into the fabric of *Soft/Cover*, a current exhibit exploring textiles as both shield and skin. Fernandes, who identifies as queer and multinational, collaborates with the museum's decorated team of artists.

Noise See is intimate and distant, mythic, and corporeal.

Rather than serving solely as an extension of *In Two* (performed by William Cannon and Andie Yorita), *Noise See* emerges as a parallel inquiry into intimacy and vulnerability—recurring themes in Fernandes' work. Echoing the 2024 collaboration with Scott Burton's "furniture sculptures" (commissioned by Pulitzer Arts Foundation) *Noise See* blurs the boundaries of shape-shifting identity, activating the space between desire for closeness and need for distance.

Noise See opens with striking imagery. Floyd McLean, Jr. and Brandi Pinnix, barefaced and barefoot, enter the space with quiet regality. They avoid the audience's gaze, locking eyes with each other instead. They circle slowly and warily, muscles taut with electricity. The air hums with daring, almost provocative energy. The duet feels sacred. A complex interplay unfolds: control and yielding,

pursuit and retreat, watching and being watched. The emotions run deep—warmth met with tension and cold possessiveness.

Then, a shift. With deliberate reverence, each dancer pulls a hood over their face, hiding their features beneath a red-and-blue shuka. At times, it soothes; at others, it smothers. The shuka becomes a second skin—at once an extension of the body, a shield, a weight, and a sacred relic.

Classical technique haunts the body in *Noise See*, its presence lingering in every suspended balance and grounded impulse. The movement is slow, precise, and breathtaking in its control. A deep plié held in arabesque for nearly a minute becomes a study in balance and trust, as each dancer leans on the other for support. Echoes of Horton, Ailey, Graham, Balanchine, and Limón reverberate throughout the work—through articulated feet, pronated palms, spiraling torsos, and a breath-driven series of catches and releases.

Noise See moves between moments of intimacy and distance. The shifts are often sharp, but the movement stays fluid—flowing through continuous port de bras and subtle transitions from demi to full pointe. Even in slow passages, the choreography requires stamina and precise technique.

Juxtaposition drives the narrative, paced by highly-controlled, yet audible breathing. The dancers' harmony falters, then returns. A rhythm emerges—of gathering and retreating, of holding and withholding. The snap of fabric. The snap of fingers. Repeat. Two sharp beats cut through the hushed hum of the museum's air conditioning.

At times, one dancer exits as the other enters; at others, they move together. The structure doesn't follow a clear narrative, but instead explores a dynamic exchange of contrasts and continuous change.

Noise See is visual and performing art, in tandem. Kenya, long cast in the shadow of British colonization, is preserved in the patterned polyester of the shuka—both in reverie and resilience. The shuka is synonymous with Maa identity and community, however, the same British imperial forces that outlawed Scottish tartan would later go on to colonize Kenya, where Maasai dress became commodified and exoticized. The bright red-and-blue pattern of the Maasai shuka involves layers of complex history and painful irony.

Fernandes evokes the spiritual significance of face-covering in Maasai culture, where hoods signal moments of transition or communion with the ancestral realm. To cover one's face is not to disappear but rather to transform—to cross into the temple of performance, where the body becomes both vessel and spirit. The [shuka](#) is a cultural code, loaded with memory, defiance, and spirit. Fernandes uses it to ask: What does it mean to wear something that marks you, hides you, frees you? Only at the end do the dancers uncover themselves again, returning to their true selves—if only briefly.

In *Noise See*, face-covering, dance, and dress serve as both shields and bridges—preserving spiritual traditions while signaling transformation. For the Maasai, the fight to uphold cultural sovereignty is an act of fierce resilience.

Noise See is a sacred offering, a complex woven tale—both radiant and resilient, like the evolving language of identity. Its story speaks to what we carry, what we hide, and above all, what we reveal to ourselves and to each other in a world that demands conformity. Fernandes' work confronts the cost of authenticity and acceptance, inviting us to consider why we mask—and offering a glimpse of the freedom in moving as our truest selves.