

D'Souza, Aruna. "For South Asian Artists, Identity Doesn't Fit in a Box," The New York Times. August 2025

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For South Asian Artists, Identity Doesn't Fit in a Box

These four artists are turning to centuries-old stories of migration to expand contemporary understandings of race, ethnicity and origin.



Brendan Fernandes, "In Two XI," 2025 digital print. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC.

The Chicago-based artist Brendan Fernandes, whose great-grandparents immigrated from Goa, India, identifies as "a Kenyan Indian Goan who is Canadian-slash-American." "I identify as a Kenyan Indian Goan who is Canadian-slash-American," said Brendan Fernandes, a Chicago-based artist whose work melds dance, sculpture, installation and performance, in a recent conversation. "I'm also queer, a punk rocker, and a ballerina."

Fernandes's great-grandparents migrated from Goa, then a Portuguese colony on the western coast of India, to Nairobi in the 19th century to administer the building of railroads. Fernandes subsequently moved to Canada with his parents in the 1980s and recently became a U.S. citizen. He sees himself as a

“complicating factor” in an art world that he said often relies upon fixed identity categories like Black, Latino, Asian and so forth.

His background is considered so unfamiliar that his work was once dropped from a book about Black and African futurisms when the editors realized they had mistakenly assumed that since he was African, he must be Black. “People will say to me, ‘Well, you’re not African.’ And I’m like, ‘Why am I not African?’” he said. “The continent of Africa is vast. It’s not a monolithic space, but people try to put me into a very monolithic narrative.”

Fernandes has traveled to India as an adult — including to Goa, where he said he was struck by the way the shrimp curry he ate at restaurants was almost exactly like that of his grandmother, even though she never left Kenya. The persistence of such cultural practices over time and geography fuels his work, which will be on view in New York at his solo show of photography and sculpture at Susan Inglett Gallery, opening Sept. 4. “I’ve always looked at questions of authenticity, homemaking, belonging, the migration of cultural artifacts, and so on,” he said.

For an upcoming public art project, he plans on working with cowrie shells. “You can find them on the beaches of Kenya, you can find them on the beaches of Goa,” he said. “They’re just like the spices that were crossing the sea, connecting these two places before European colonizers ever showed up.”

Aruna D'Souza writes about modern and contemporary art and is the author of “Whitewalling: Art, Race & Politics in 3 Acts.” In 2021 she was awarded a Rabkin Prize for Art Journalism.