

SUSAN INGLETT GALLERY

LONGFORMS

Brendan Fernandes: In Touch

Becket Gourlay

Installation view of *Duet* at Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC | Photo: Adam Reich

At Susan Inglett Gallery, a boulder is situated between a muslin cotton curtain and a framed photograph. Further inspection reveals the stone is not what it seems, constructed of printed canvas and buckwheat shells, a pliable facsimile of the real thing. Titled *Soft Touch I*, the piece and its titling are an effective summary of the exhibition, Brendan Fernandes' *Duet*.

Duet is a culmination of various media and inspirations in Fernandes' practice, combining his medium of dance and movement, the documentation of such expressions, and intentional sculpture works that mediate the body. Throughout his practice, Fernandes has experimented with many creative expressions, from neon signs to sculptural installations, large-scale projection to time-based media and animation. The common thread of his work, and something that he still meditates on to this day, is the broadness of self, how the numerous facets of an identity contribute to the whole.

*Soft Touch I*, 2024

The works seen in *Duet* began as a series of commissioned performances and sculptural works staged at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation, in response to their exhibition *Scott Burton: Shape Shift*. The show was a comprehensive examination of the late artist's multifarious works, including drawings, photographs, performance documentation, and pieces that Burton described as "sculpture in love with furniture." The exhibition sought to elucidate Burton's role as a contributor to contemporary queer, public, and conceptual art following his passing in 1989 due to AIDS-related complications. Fernandes' response to Burton's expansive practice was performances that not only interacted with the granite and stone works on display at The Pulitzer Arts Foundation, but also interpreted Burton's performances themselves, which explored power dynamics, nonverbal communication, body language, and interpersonality.



In Two XI, 2025

Captured in medium-format film photography, the choreographed duets highlight the themes at play in fine detail; intimacy, tension, and observation are found in the nuanced moments between the paired dancers. The body language and movements in both Burton's and Fernandes' work take cues from the practice of "cruising," in which pleasure or intimacy is sought out in public spaces. This verbiage, popularized in contemporary lexicons by members of the queer community, adapts the literal definition: leisured or pleasurable transport with no set destination. In times when flagrant displays of queerness could result in ostracization or even violence, coupled with the lack of digital interfaces, the most viable method of enjoying such pleasures was to seek them out in public and employ subtle, silent communication.

The photos exemplify Fernandes' intentionality within his work. The styling of the dancers, dressed in crisp, white t-shirts, light-wash denim, and black platformed loafers, matches the looks in Burton's *Behavior Tableaux* almost exactly, identified as a "uniform" by Fernandes. The outfitting is timeless, genderless, and glaringly basic, a sartorial blank canvas upon which desires can be projected. The dancers could be any one of us. In works like *As Two IV* or *As Two: Duet II*, the latter a diptych, slants of sunlight and angular shadows also populate the frames, further revealing the care Fernandes took in composing the shots. A beam of light highlights a bent wrist, a gesture attributed to queer men and used in the performances to signal to the opposite partner. In the diptych, a dancer appears in motion next to a Burton sculpture installed at the Pulitzer, and in the neighboring panel, only his elongated shadow suggests presence.

*As Two IV*, 2025*As Two II*, 2025

Burton's tableaux performances were slow, restrained, and tended to be, as described by Michael Harwood, a performer in Burton's 1972 *Group Behavior Tableaux* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, "melancholic." The "tableaux" seemed to respond to the often isolating experience of queerfolk at the time. Fernandes interprets these codes in *Duet* in the documented performances and in the soft sculptures themselves, but with a lens that is decidedly more optimistic, a result of the strides taken in queer visibility and community since Burton's time. The set of curtains, already referential of a Burton tableaux that similarly used drapes, is screen-printed with what appear to be random stains. The printed smudges are, in fact, larger-than-life fingerprint streaks and smudges, lifted directly from Fernandes' phone screen as he swipes and taps through hookup and dating apps, a contemporary update of cruising culture.

*As Two IX, 2025*

Made in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, the curtains and boulders often acted as a third dancer in the choreography, as the performers wielded the fabric as a tool of obfuscation, revelation, and entanglement, or used the boulders to at once support and challenge their bodies. Another material link to Burton and his proclivity for stone as a medium in his sculptural furnishings, the boulders are visually unyielding but haptically pliant; the tension between hardness and softness is just as much present in the sculpture as in the photographic images, which display the warmth of the cotton curtains backdropped by the stoic concrete.

Within the context of Fernandes' body of work, *Duet* functions as the newest entry into his queer performance canon, dissecting the role of performative identity and clandestine communication as integral functions of the queer experience. However, the themes presented also speak to a more universal experience, in which disparate truths can exist simultaneously. The duets in question are more than a dance. They represent the tension between opposites: what is seen and what is unseen, hardness and softness, isolation and togetherness. And while these oppositions provide the basis of Fernandes' creative inquisition, his locus is that, ultimately, togetherness is the mission, that meaning is found in these shared moments.

*As Two III, 2025*