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‘Brendan Fernandes: In the Round’ at Driehaus Museum thinks outside the gilded box



By **LAUREN WARNECKE** | For the Chicago Tribune
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One of the first things Brendan Fernandes does when he walks into the Murphy Auditorium is look up.

“It’s always a moment of spectacle when you walk into this space,” he says.

The first time he saw it, Fernandes noticed the circular oculus crowning the auditorium of this richly appointed Beaux Arts building in the Gold Coast. It provided the initial spark for “In the Round,” a dynamic dance, sound and visual art installation spanning April and May, then returning in the fall for five performances in total.



Artist-in-residence Brendan Fernandes. (Vincent D. Johnson/for the Chicago Tribune)

“In the Round” is part of the Driehaus Museum’s “A Tale of Today” series, which brings contemporary art and ideas into conversation with the museum’s Gilded Age aesthetic. And it cuts the ribbon on a new era for the Driehaus, with Fernandes as the museum’s first-ever artist-in-residence.

Fernandes is no stranger to nontraditional dance spaces. It’s kind of his thing.

“I do dance in museums,” he says. “That is a specific kind of choreography. We go to museums and we’re told how to move. You don’t touch things. You’re quiet. We have etiquette. That is a form of everyday choreography.”

“In the Round,” he says, asks patrons and performers alike to reflect on those ingrained expectations — to work within and press against such rules.

“For me, it’s about how we find freedom in that restraint?” he says. “How do we make new doorways? It’s about building new accessibility, which I think is what this museum is doing right now.”

Born in Nairobi and raised in Kenya and Canada, Fernandes’ dance career was sidelined by an injury. He pursued visual art, first in Ontario, then in New York through the Whitney Museum’s Independent Study Program. He eventually came back to dance — primarily producing body-based installations with mixed media elements. After years living in Canada and New York, Fernandes has spent the last decade in Chicago, where he teaches a variety of disciplines in Northwestern University’s art department.

“The movie ‘Mean Girls’ is kind of about me,” he says. “She left Nairobi and then came to Evanston with her family. I also, by chance, went to college with Rachel McAdams.”



Artist-in-residence Brendan Fernandes, left, and curator Stephanie Cristello in the Murphy Auditorium at the Driehaus Museum, March 17, 2026, in Chicago. (Vincent D. Johnson/for the Chicago Tribune)

Guest curator Stephanie Cristello, who for seven years was the artistic director of Expo Chicago, is similarly unfazed by this unconventional gallery. She's worked with Fernandes a handful of times and compiled the Driehaus Museum's first contemporary art exhibition tucked among the museum's vast collection of decorative arts in the 1883 Nickerson Mansion at 40 E. Erie Street — plus a few after that.

"So many people, even who live in Chicago, had never been inside or knew that they could come inside," Cristello says. "It was an opportunity to develop an audience that wasn't necessarily coming for decorative arts of the Gilded Age. But because they were able to come in through an exhibition, they ended up coming for every exhibition in the future."

Like the mansion, the Murphy Auditorium has not a single bit of wall space on which to hang a piece of art.

"I am always looking for really unique architectural contexts to show contemporary art in," Cristello says. "I'm not at an institution with white walls. With the Murphy, the invitation was, how can we show a contemporary art exhibition in an auditorium that also has to host other programming? It's very different from the Nickerson Mansion in that way. It has this additional layer of what you can and cannot do."

The Driehaus Museum underwent two leadership changes in short succession, with Lisa M. Key [replacing Anna Musci](#) in 2023, after weathering the death of their founder and namesake [Richard Driehaus](#) in 2021. They bought their next-door neighbor, the [Murphy Auditorium](#), from the American College of Surgeons months after Driehaus died, renovating and opening it to the public in 2024.

"It was always Richard Driehaus' dream to bring these buildings back together," says museum spokesperson Julie Treumann.

The 1926 auditorium, designed by Chicago architects Benjamin Marshall and Charles Fox (whose resumes also include the Drake and Blackstone Hotels), once housed surgical conferences.

"Basically, it was empty," Treumann says, apart from the occasional wedding. "It's the first time it's been open to the public in a hundred years."

Visiting the Murphy Auditorium is free. Museum patrons now enter the Nickerson Mansion by first traveling through it.

“This space has really changed our profile as a museum, and it has, more importantly, allowed us to, as we say, open our doors much wider to the community,” Treumann says. “I think Brendan’s residency here is taking that to a whole new level. I really do think this is the apotheosis of this moment for all of us.”

For “In the Round,” AIM Architecture is creating modular, curvilinear, mirrored benches to play off the Murphy Auditorium’s round-by-nature appeal. Screen-printed textiles developed in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia offer a “topographic” depiction of the partly improvised dance score performed by a dance ensemble of Chicago’s top-shelf freelancers: Laura Baumeister, Hanna DiLorenzo, Kara Hunsinger, Nick Kearns, Princess Reid, Brian Josiah Martinez and Xenia Mansour. Alex Ingilizian, Fernandes’ colleague at Northwestern University and the co-director of Experimental Sound Studio, creates the music. And those visual and sonic elements remain active outside official performances of Fernandes’ “Score for the Murphy Auditorium,” which are peppered through the season on April 10 and May 6.

Baumeister is also creating a piece in the Murphy throughout the residency, with open rehearsals on May 6 and 8, a four-hour solo improvisation on May 7, and a performance with collaborator Jenna Weatherbie on May 9.

A key factor of “In the Round,” Fernandes says, is the time.

“The structure of exhibitions are, you have a month, period. Start date, end date,” he says.

By design, this structure lets the work “incubate, germinate and manifest.” The performance in May thus won’t be the same as the performance in April.

“For me, that kind of process is really exciting,” says Fernandes. “We don’t get those opportunities. But it’s also to challenge those structures we have built around institutions like museums.”

A source of inspiration for “In the Round” is the Judson Dance Theater, a New York collective of multidisciplinary experimental artists whose performances in a Greenwich Village church laid the influential foundation for postmodern dance.

That was the 1960s, and Fernandes says the arts have since settled into a kind of routine that needs shaking up. “In the Round” is an invitation and a provocation to break those habits.

“This is a mini way of saying we should find new ways of doing things socially and politically. It’s not anything super new — we just need to do more of it,” he says. “Space is a commodity. We’re having wars about land and space right now. Not just now, always. What if we just support each other and collaboratively generate? That was the ethos of Judson.”

Lauren Warnecke is a freelance writer.

If you go

“Brendan Fernandes: In the Round” runs from April 9 to Nov. 14 in the Murphy Auditorium at the Driehaus Museum, 50 E. Erie St.; 312-482-8933 and driehausmuseum.org

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