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Sirens over Lake Ontario: Toronto Biennial of Art kicks off with performance aboard a tall ship

Artist Brendan Fernandes brings an 18-person choir mimicking police sirens to the water in *The Calls*



[Leah Collins](#) · CBC Arts · Posted: Sep 23, 2026 9:52 AM EDT | Last Updated: September 23



It's a Toronto landmark with no fixed address. The tall ship Kajama is a fixture of the city's waterfront during the summer months, and while the weather is warm, tourists and other revellers come on board for music, dancing and skyline views.

This Sunday will be no different. For much of the afternoon, the party boat has been booked by the Toronto Biennial of Art. The city-wide exhibition launches its latest edition Thursday, and as part of the opening-weekend festivities, a special event will be held on the Kajama's deck: two back-to-back performances from the mind of [Brendan Fernandes](#).

Born in Nairobi, raised in the GTA and now living in States, where he's an associate professor at Northwestern University, Fernandes is renowned for splicing disciplines together: ballet, photography, sculpture, etc. Sunday on the Kajama, he'll present a new iteration of a piece he first staged in 2023, [The Calls](#).

It's a hybrid creation, involving immersive sound and contemporary dance, but a choral performance is the focus of the show. It's not music you'll hear on a booze-cruise playlist. If anything, it's meant to sound downright alarming in the most literal sense of the phrase.

Written by Niels Rosing-Schow with lyrics by Fernandes, *The Calls* is a composition for 18 vocalists. Sunday, it'll be performed by members of Toronto's Modern Sound Collective Choir who will be joined by two dancers from Hit & Run Dance Productions.

At times, the choir will come together in harmony. Mostly, though, they're meant to sing out of sync — mimicking the piercing din of emergency sirens.

Is the sound meant to signal a warning? A call to action? A few things come to mind when Fernandes hears a siren. But on the surface at least, the sound takes him back to 2020.

Fernandes was already living in Chicago when COVID-19 struck. Originally trained as a dancer, quarantine living left him pondering an existential dilly. How would he make art in lockdown?

"My work is about bodies being together, bodies supporting each other, bodies in collaboration," says Fernandes, and while isolating at home, he was plagued by the noise he heard on the street outside. "All I could hear at the time was police sirens — just the sound of sirens in the city — as I'm home trying to figure out life."

For Fernandes, the noise was more than a nuisance; it was loaded with meaning. "I've always felt that in my work — as a queer, POC-identifying person — that a police system is not supporting my body, my community," he says. Those ideas were spinning in his mind when he received a call from a former collaborator, Danish curator Catherine Lefebvre.

"I said to her, would you consider me making a work — a song about sirens?" The piece would critique authority and the policing of marginalized communities. There would be a mythological element underpinning it all — the sirens of Homer's *Odyssey*, whose song lures sailors to their doom. Trained vocalists would create the noises, while singing lines about rising up together in solidarity.

For the first staging of *The Calls*, in 2023, the Danish Radio Vokalensemble performed the piece at the Royal Danish Library in Copenhagen. Putting it on a boat was never part of the original vision, but when Allison Glenn, curator of the 2026 edition of the Toronto Biennial of Art, pitched Fernandes on the concept of performing it on the water, he was quickly convinced.

"A ship kind of made sense," he says. It creates a sense of spectacle, for one, but presenting the show on a moving vessel mirrors the "in between" nature of the piece itself. The performance captures an "in between space of support, nurture and care but also caution," he says. "We're living in precarious times."

Two performances of *The Calls* will take place on Sunday, with one-hour sailings leaving at noon and 2:15 p.m. [Tickets are free](#), but as of writing, all the spots have been snatched up; it is, however, possible to add your name to a waitlist.

“I didn’t want [*The Calls*] to just be performed static again, like on the stage,” says Fernandes. “My work is durational, so people can move around the boat. They can stay for the whole 40 minutes — well, they have to stay this time. They can’t go anywhere,” he laughs. “But they can look out at the water and contemplate as they hear the sound.”

The Calls is one of several projects Fernandes has on the go this season around Canada and the United States. His work is also appearing in another event for the Toronto Biennial, a group exhibition at [Gallery TPW](#). For that show, he’ll present selections from his photographic series Noise See.

Earlier this week, he opened Other Moves, an exhibition at [Esker Foundation](#) in Calgary. He will return to his hometown of Newmarket, Ont., on Sept. 29 to celebrate his new public art commission at [Mulock Park](#), a stainless-steel sculpture titled *Calling Community*. And on Oct. 3, he’ll remount *On Flashing Lights* at [Nuit Blanche Toronto](#). First presented at the 2018 event, it’s a veritable all-night dance party at City Hall’s underground parking garage featuring music by local queer and racialized DJs. The centrepiece? A row of cop cars, bathing the scene in electric blue and red light.

In contrast, *The Calls* may seem decidedly more muted. “Will you be able to hear it if you’re sitting on the harbourfront or on the water? I’m not sure,” says Fernandes. “Maybe [you’ll] get a sense of a murmur, which I kind of like.” The piece plays with that tension, he explains. “We want to be seen and heard, but sometimes we’re not,” says Fernandes. “That’s part of political protest, in my mind.”