

Day, Gary L. "Queer artist transforms the Barnes Foundation into a 'spiritual ground,'" *Philadelphia Gay News*, 17 July 2023.

PHILADELPHIA GAY NEWS

Queer artist transforms the Barnes Foundation into a 'spiritual ground'

By **Gary L. Day**

July 17, 2023 11:44 am



"William Edmondson: A Monumental Vision" is on display at the Barnes Foundation through September. (Photo: Daniel Jackson for Embassy: Interactive)

Philadelphia is fortunate to have a number of arts institutions that are guided by people blessed with imagination and drive to make art more accessible and more relatable to the general public. One of those institutions is the Barnes Foundation, located on Benjamin Franklin Parkway.

The Barnes recently opened its latest exhibition, "William Edmondson: A Monumental Vision." Edmondson was a prominent 20th century sculptor who was notable for, among other things, being the first African-American artist to have a solo show at New York's Museum of Modern Art in the 1930s.

To enhance and complement the Edmondson exhibit, the Barnes commissioned visual and movement artist Brendan Fernandes to devise an ongoing installation, a dance

piece to be viewed in the midst of and in conjunction with Edmondson's sculptures. Called "Returning to Before," the choreography is intended to allow the audience to better understand and experience the spirituality inherent in Edmondson's sculptures.

Prior to the opening performance of "Returning to Before," Fernandes — who identifies as queer — held a talk, joined by scholar Christina Knight and James Claiborne, a co-curator of the Edmondson exhibit. Fernandes spoke about his creative process and how he was inspired by Edmondson's work.

One of Fernandes' points was his theory that today's art institutions tend to choreograph their visitors; i.e., they have devised an etiquette for how people should view and experience art. Fernandes felt that this was classist, making a lot of people feel uncomfortable in museums, that the "museum experience" was not for them. This was something that he wanted to challenge with his dance installation.

"Returning to Before" is certainly not your typical dance performance. For one thing, the audience is not required to sit (or stand) through the entire performance beginning to end. The piece is structured in such a way as to allow people to come and go from the gallery as they wish, and to move about as the spirit moves them. The ultimate effect is, as the Barnes itself said [in a release](#), "The dancers'

collective movement — and the visitors' movements within the exhibition — transform the gallery space into a spiritual ground for communal homage to Edmondson's legacy."



There is an altar-like ambience in the gallery as the dancers' choreography enables the audience to imagine the sculptor's physical labor in creating his art. The atmosphere is enhanced by a tapestry, designed by Fernandes, and activated by the dancers.

Fernandes' choreography employs elements of ballet, modern and contemporary dance which, combined with the overall environment of the gallery, makes one think they have undergone something akin to a religious experience.

"Returning to Before" will be performed twice a day on Saturdays, noon and 2 p.m., through Sept. 2, in the Roberts Gallery at the Barnes Foundation, 2025 Benjamin Franklin Parkway. General admission to the Barnes allows access to performances.