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VOGUE

At the Barnes Foundation, a Spiritual Convergence of Stone Sculpture and Dance

BY ROBERT SULLIVAN



Brendan Fernandes's *Returning to Before*, the Barnes Foundation, 2023. Photo: Daniel Jackson / Embassy: Interactive

Museums are quiet, contemplative spaces, like cabinet drawers—divorced from the messy world, or at least that's what, thanks to colonialism and its related market forces, many of us have been trained to believe. We go to museums to stand apart from art, and the "we" who go, are the "we" who get to, who feel comfortable being there, moving as if choreographed. This summer, twice every Saturday until September 2, the Barnes Foundation, in downtown Philadelphia, is staging a dance in a gallery space, in an attempt to re-choreograph the idea of a museum.

The setting is an exhibit of sculptures made by William Edmondson. An early 20th-century Black sculptor, Edmondson's work, in the late 1930s, was described then, even by the Museum of Modern Art when it exhibited him, as art that didn't necessarily belong behind their velvet ropes. ("He has had no art training," MOMA's [1937 press release](#) said, "and very little education, and has probably never seen a piece of sculpture except his own.") The Barnes show argues that, in part because it referred to matters of the spirit, and specifically spirit in Black communities, it was life-altering work that was billed as accidentally important.



William Edmondson by Louise Dahl-Wolfe, 1937. Cheekwood Estate and Gardens, Nashville.
Photo: Louise Dahl-Wolfe © Center for Creative Photography, Arizona Board of Regents

The dance performance, to take place in the gallery where Edmondson's pieces are displayed, is entitled *Returning to Before*, and it is choreographed by Brendan Fernandes, an artist and performer known for bringing movement into galleries in order to explore power structures. In this case, he is exploring what the museum's power has kept *outside* the gallery—namely, the spiritual nature of Edmondson's work. Entitled "William Edmondson: A Monumental Vision," the show is in itself powerful, first of all, for all the emotion that Edmondson's supple rock sculptures contain: small pieces that are as charming as they are smart and feel as if they have been collected from a disassembled medieval cathedral, though in this case the spiritual space from which the pieces might have been transferred would be neither a cathedral nor European. In fact, the Barnes curators offer a story about Edmondson that helps us see how diasporic and marginalized communities speak to each other, often in a language indiscernible by the world within which they work to survive.

Edmondson began sculpting around 1931. He had worked on a railroad until suffering an injury, then became an orderly at a Nashville women's hospital. He was born around 1874 to formerly enslaved parents on a Tennessee plantation where it is thought that he cared for livestock. The story that he told then (according to the mostly white reporters who took it down at the time) was that he had received a message from the divine to make a grave marker. "Jesus has planted the seed of carving in me," he told *Time*, yet the newsmagazine made him sound less like Picasso, more like a sweet old man.



William Edmondson, *Untitled (Boxer)*, 1936. Courtesy of the Museum of Everything, London.
Photo: © 2016 Christie's Images Limited

One of Edmondson's earliest pieces, a tombstone for a woman named Bernice Williams, is a lamb chiseled out of rough stone, likely around the time the women's hospital closed. Using rocks discarded by the Nashville roads department, he carved numerous animals, as well as human figures and figures somewhere in between: doves, owls, a preacher, a couple posed with Egyptian pyramids. (In-

person visitors to the Barnes can see what at-home and online viewers maybe cannot: they are arm in arm from the rear view, a hidden and tactile closeness.) Edmondson sculpts Jesus, as well as boxer Joe Louis, who in 1937 had just won a world championship. Or, it is *like* Joe Louis. The titles weren't necessarily written by Edmondson, but as the first Black world heavyweight champion, victorious during Jim Crow, Jackson was a 20th-century embodiment of hope and salvation against the odds, fighting for way more than a title and a purse. And despite MOMA's description of Edmondson as an idiot savant, with no notion of an outside world, one sculpture, a male nude, was commissioned by his friend Sidney Milton Hirsch, described in the catalog as "a white, Jewish intellectual and openly gay man who had worked as an artist's model in Paris and who had a special interest in ancient religions and languages. . . ." "We don't want Edmondson to seem like he's working on a vacuum," said James Claiborne, the outgoing Barnes curator of public programs, on a tour of the show. (Claiborne recently moved to the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, in Detroit.)



William Edmondson, *Ancient Egyptian Couple (formerly Adam and Eve)*, c. 1940.
Photo: Courtesy of the Museum of Everything, London

The Barnes catalog on Edmondson, which is excellent, helps us see what the museums of the past did not want us to, and the real Edmondson, it seems, was a man who stood out in Nashville as a representative of a Black community that saw not only the artistry of his sculptures, but also the spiritual and political messages built into them. They were, indeed, both sacred and practical, small miracles in a community intentionally resource-starved. "In segregated cemeteries specifically a lot of families could not afford to have their graves marked," TK Smith, the Barnes's assistant curator for art of the African diaspora, has said. "To have someone specifically making tombstones for their community is one of the most powerful things you can do—not necessarily as an artist but as a maker and as a member of that community, and this exhibition specifically tries to forefront his place, in his community, as a person who belonged to a family, as a person who belonged to Nashville, more so than his role in art history."

The Bible references that MOMA stumbled over in 1937—an intentional misread, for the way it upheld a racial status quo in art institutions that were designed as, in the broadest sense, white frames—translate now as notes of resistance and survival. "Saturated in his culture of Blackness," writes Leslie King Hammond, director of the Center for Race and Culture at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, "fortified by his strong moral character, powers of observation, and profound religious and spiritual grace, [Edmondson] became a radiant beacon for a different modernism in an era that did not recognize the complexity and originality of African American expression."

Which was the challenge that Fernandes had set for the debut of his summer-long performance run at the Barnes: In a world where galleries and spiritual matters are considered divided—a notion that might startle generations of European painters—would dance activate the space in some way that aligned with the spiritual nature of Edmondson's work?



Another view of Fernandes's *Returning to Before*, the Barnes Foundation, 2023.
Photo: Daniel Jackson / Embassy: Interactive

To begin the evening, a four-person chorus of dancers (Tiffany Mangulabnan, Allison Walsh, Mikal Gilbert, and Brena Thomas) entered the gallery from the Barnes's great hall, dancing in, spiraling around, following what seem to be invisible currents. Dressed in diaphanous tunics (burgundy, peach, and ivory), they paused before the sculptures, seeing, snapping, and tapping, as if echo-locating Edmondson's works, surveying with movement the recycled curbstones and discarded limestone windowsills that he transformed. Over the course of an hour, as visitors moved in and out at will, one dancer seemed to address a sculpture, or match its pose, or entertain a conversation. Another allowed themselves to be addressed by an Edmondson piece, which was both entertaining and illustrative, the dancer's movement embodied by the stones that, with calloused hands and the clank of his hammer and chisel, Edmondson had embodied himself. At one point, they moved to a platform that centered the gallery, draped by a tapestry fashioned by Fernandes. For a while, a tableau was assembled and reassembled, not so much static as fluid, a human sculpture in itself. One body slightly raised up for a moment, appearing to emerge like a moth from its hardened chrysalis. It was a beautiful gesture, like something Edmondson might have sculpted, and helped at least a few onlookers feel in the stones a different set of currents, a kind of rising tide.