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Dancing through a museum: An artist duets with a departed influence at the Pulitzer

St. Louis Public Radio | By [Jeremy D. Goodwin](#)

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When does a chair become a work of art? Or when might a work of art become a chair?

American artist Scott Burton explored such questions throughout a body of work that includes photography, drawings, art criticism and many sculptures designed for outdoor use as seating spaces for passersby.

"Shape Shift," on view at Pulitzer Arts Foundation through Feb. 2, is the first comprehensive museum exhibition of Burton's art since his 1989 death of AIDS-related illness. The exhibition will become a stage of sorts on Friday and Saturday for "In Two," a new piece choreographed by Brendan Fernandes that includes four dancers moving throughout the museum space, around and sometimes on top of Burton's sculptures.

Fernandes is a former dancer who now creates prints, drawings and assorted art installations but specializes in movement pieces he choreographs for performance in museums and galleries. He was born in Nairobi to a family that had moved to Kenya from India a few

generations prior. His family relocated to Canada when Fernandes was 10, both to flee political instability and to be closer to the colleges and universities his older sisters wanted to attend.

"We're Indians. We're Kenyans. We're Canadians. And I would have to identify with having an American side as well," Fernandes said. "For me, identity is something that is hybrid. It's constantly in flux, and through lived experiences and engagements, one challenges themselves and becomes different things."

Burton was considered a major American artist at the time of his death. Art world experts say his prominence has diminished in part as the unexpected consequence of an unusual arrangement in which New York's Museum of Modern Art assumed posthumous ownership of Burton's work. "Shape Shift," curated by the Pulitzer's Assistant Curator Heather Alexis Smith and independent curator Jess Wilcox, juxtaposes about 40 of Burton's sculptures and more than 70 of his photographs and drawings with archival video, photos and supporting materials.

Now based in Chicago, Fernandes keeps a busy schedule, working — as did Burton — in assorted mediums, for pieces installed outdoors and indoors. Through late November, Fernandes' visual piece "Build Up the House" is projected onto the enormous facade of Chicago's iconic Merchandise Mart four nights a week. Next year, he'll present work at a college gallery in Vermont and create a piece of public art for a town in Ontario.

After this week's events at the Pulitzer, dancers will perform "In Two" twice more there in January.

St. Louis Public Radio's Jeremy D. Goodwin asked Fernandes about Burton's influence and the overlap between their artistic concerns.

Jeremy D. Goodwin: When did you first encounter the work of Scott Burton?

Brendan Fernandes: I really started to formally understand his work in grad school. I started to really understand it through this identity of his queerness and the way that he made these objects that were stone and hard, but really had these kind of intimacies to them that I really found akin to the way that I think about my work — as somebody who makes work with physical bodies but also collaborates bodies with sculpture as well.

Goodwin: What do your concerns as an artist have in common with his?

Fernandes: Some of the synergies between my work and Burton's work are the questions of gay, queer legacy; visibility, the questions of freedoms and solidarities that Burton is looking for. I still strive to find those in my work. I think Burton is a queer artist from a certain period of time, and the work that he did has allowed and led me to be able to do things that I am now doing in my work. But the work is never done, and we're still pushing forward.

He talked a lot about this notion of cruising, and how to make a body visible. And in my work, I'm always questioning ideas of gathering and solidarity as actions of protest, but also actions of where we need to be seen and heard. And so I think there's questions of visibility, invisibility, being seen, being heard, that I see in Scott's work and that I'm also trying to tease and kind of challenge in my work.

Goodwin: How did you, as a movement choreographer, create a piece that converses with the collected sculpture of an artist who died in 1989?

Fernandes: I feel a beautiful duet happening. Scott always made works in duets — kind of the idea of two bodies looking and seeing each other, or the body dancing with the sculpture. So

I've taken that as a lead into how I'm making the choreography. So it's a duet between me and Scott Burton, conceptually, but also between my dancers and his sculptures, or my dancers with themselves.

Goodwin: The movement is rather subtle, right? It's more emotionally expressive than acrobatic.

Fernandes: Yes. I'm thinking about the idea of cruising as a body language to signal and signify a call — almost for a response, for gay people to identify and find a safe space to be with each other, normally under the auspices of a sexual encounter.

When you think about technical dance, you think about jumps and spectacles. This is more subtle. There are moments like the flipping of the wrist that Scott discussed in some of his writings about his performances. The broken wrist is a symbol for queerness in a certain way — the bent wrist, not straight. And so I'm playing with that as a signal of empowerment, that when they're all doing it, they call to each other. They come together.

Goodwin: There's a Burton work, "Two-Part Chair," that's two pieces of granite that prop each other up into a chair, which visitors are invited to use. It's often described as a subtle, or not so subtle, reference to a sexual pose between two men. Once you see it, you see it. I found the piece extremely moving: a reference to gay life that had to be hidden in plain sight in the 1980s. How does that relate to what you're thinking about in your piece?

Fernandes: The idea of being seen and unseen is a big part of Scott's work, and I think that's something that I challenge and play with as well. I want to be seen. I want to be heard. But I also want to be invisible. I've been thinking a lot lately about this idea of invisibility. If I have my freedoms and rights, am I going to be invisible? Do I not need to be calling out to be seen and heard, or making actions to be seen and heard? And so I'm kind of playing with the dynamic that that sculpture, that pose, proposes. I think that's kind of the thesis that I'm playing with in this this exhibition.

Goodwin: Four dancers will perform your piece "[In Two](#)" at the Pulitzer. And this is not a situation where people are sitting in rows of seats, looking up at a performance space. What's the the look and feel of how this performance takes shape in the space?

Fernandes: I think the performance breaks down the binaries of the proscenium. It's moving throughout the space. So the audience kind of is also a participant in the sense that they move with the dancers, if they choose. They can watch the whole thing, or they can also just be there for a few minutes. I also like that a museumgoer might come to the Pulitzer not knowing that the performance is happening, and then have that encounter.

There's a certain sense of intimacy to the way the dancers move, as well. There's an intimacy with how they lay on the sculptures and moving with the sculptures and touch the sculptures. And I was really interested in this idea of the cold, hard stone, and then the warm, living body, as it kind of caresses and is informed or affected by these objects.

Goodwin: The whole thing is a bit of a disruption of the stand-and-look-at-the-wall feeling that people might associate with a museum visit.

Fernandes: Museums tell us how to move in their spaces. We don't touch things. We have to be quiet. We don't run. And so having a performance in the space, I'm kind of rupturing that hegemony, that hierarchy, and sort of questioning about new ways of doing things, new ways of understanding things. So there's a sense of a different etiquette, a different type of choreography.