

BRENDAN FERNANDES: UNTIL WE FEARLESS

ART GALLERY OF HAMILTON, HAMILTON

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BY FARAH YUSUF

Brendan Fernandes' version of Africa operates somewhere between rave and kitsch, low tech and high tech, nostalgia and culture shock. Investigations into his own cultural exile describe a space that is entirely personal and at once political. His playful juxtapositions of primitive art and mass culture disrupt the old binaries of centre and periphery and thus reflect upon more nuanced conceptions of identity and hybridity. As such, Fernandes' work navigates the breaks and gaps rather than the continuities inherent to history—ideas that are especially prescient in a globalized culture enabled by technology and increased mobility.

No stranger to displacement, Fernandes is Kenyan born, of Goan descent, and immigrated to Canada at the age of nine. He has since cultivated an international art career by participating in residencies and exhibitions in countries as diverse as Trinidad and Tobago, Korea, China, Denmark and South Africa. Within a few short years, his prominence has grown from completion of the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2007 to nomination for Canada's pre-eminent prize for contemporary art, the Sobey Art Award in 2010. His first solo museum show, *until we fearless*, presented by the Art Gallery of Hamilton, employs language, masks, rhythm and repetition to interrogate cultural dislocation and the constructed narrative of Africa.

Upon entering the exhibit, the sound of drums echo throughout. It is not the tribal rhythms of the African continent, however, but rather an electro-pop composition by Jeremy Greenspan of the Canadian indie music duo Junior Boys. Commissioned by Fernandes, the sound pieces *AM* and *PM* are meant to accompany the centerpiece of



his exhibition, *Voo Doo You Doo Speak* (2010). Corrugated plastic and wood planks assembled into a shanty (or hunting blind) house four video monitors displaying animated masks and Dadaist sound poems. This incongruous collision of worlds seems at first an absurd hodgepodge, but the work makes perfect *nonsense* once encountered and activated.

The animated masks are rendered digitally

in simple black-and-white graphics. Their decorative elements fade and reappear, with occasional rapid flashes, inducing a visual trance that echoes the modulation and inflection of the oral accompaniment: I speakin nowz like uzzzzz. Almost nonsensical, the spoken words slip in and out of meaning and aural texture—a cadenced hybrid of dub poetry and Dadaist poetry. The Dadaists sought to liberate language from

its constructedness and imbue it with magic and energy. Their performance poetics dismantled literary content into purely sonorous fragments, rhythm and symmetry. Fernandes employs a similar technique, but his "*broke wuuuords*" and their "*in terwine ins*" acknowledge their own constructed nature, "*speckin inz powerness It be black maj jick.*"

Ultimately, *Voo Doo You Doo Speak* is

† Brendan Fernandes, *Neo-Primitivism II*, 2007, Installation view at Art Gallery of Hamilton, deer decoy, plastic African masks, vinyl
PHOTO: TONI HAFKENSHEID; IMAGE COURTESY OF DIAZ CONTEMPORARY

about intelligibility. It begs to be understood, kinesthetically as well as intellectually. The *mise en scène* of the installation transports the viewer to a simulated ritual space, one that sanctifies the boundary zone where essential meaning is questionable. And it is through *not* understanding—e.g. encountering the “foreign”—that one can strive to understand.

Love Kill (2009) and *Neo Primitivism II* (2007) offer a cyber-safari experience where the gallery’s white walls contain and tame the savannah. Reminiscent of a tourist village information centre, *Love Kill* consists of three totems hung with monitors portraying animals locked in the primal moment of the kill. Fernandes isolates and prolongs the fatal intimacy of predator and prey with subtle, almost imperceptible animations underscored by affected falsetto renditions of saccharine love songs. Mesmerizing, lyrical and odd, the piece elicits a strange voyeuristic fascination—not unlike the tourist desire to witness such inviolate acts in the wild. But here, the mediated experience



obscures the irrational, instinctive nature of the beasts with a bittersweet, romantic narrative. With *Neo Primitivism II*, the manufactured experience of the wild, natural world is sustained by a herd of identical deer decoys wearing plastic white Maasai masks. These African tropes neither belong to this world nor to the culture and environment they indicate; they are fake, displaced and absurd. Here, symbols of camouflage and exoticism conflate rootlessness, belonging and intimacy. But Fernandes’ vision of alienation is oddly comforting and humorous rather than disquieting or reactionary.

Conceding his Western education and

upbringing, Fernandes considers himself a de facto tourist in his understanding of Kenyan culture—a point made evident by his preoccupation with fabricated, digitally rendered and bought African tourist masks. Unconcerned with their provenance or authenticity as ritual artefacts, Fernandes’ use of masks and patois are communicative symbols of a negotiated condition rather than an essentially African one. As makeshift adaptations to foreign influence, tourist art and patois both achieve intelligibility through reduction, simplification and “creolization,” in which old vernaculars give way to emergent structures of communication. Fernandes’ work

operates at this register; through scavenging, borrowing and merging, it is the art of the remix. By carving out an alternate vision of Africa using plastic and pixels, the blithe irreverence of *until we fearless* pays homage to juxtaposition more so than to origins. Fernandes’ playing with language and provenance asks us to reconsider disjuncture as a fertile ground for cultural navigation where identity is woven from even the most tenuous threads of influence.

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