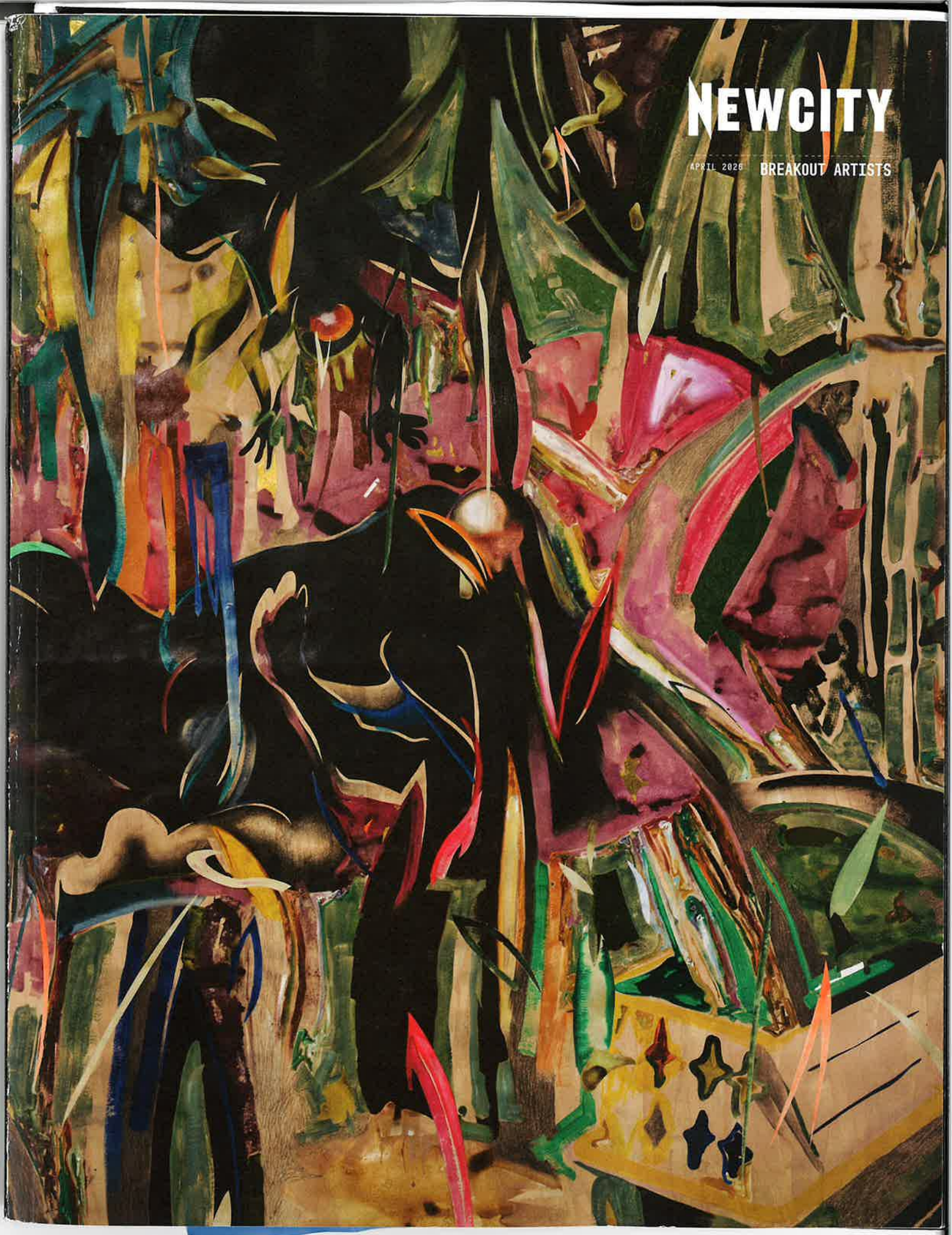

NEWCITY

APRIL 2026 BREAKOUT ARTISTS

CONTENTS
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ARTS + CULTURE

ROUND AND ABOUT

THE DRIEHAUS DANCE OF BRENDAN FERNANDES

by Sharon Hoyer

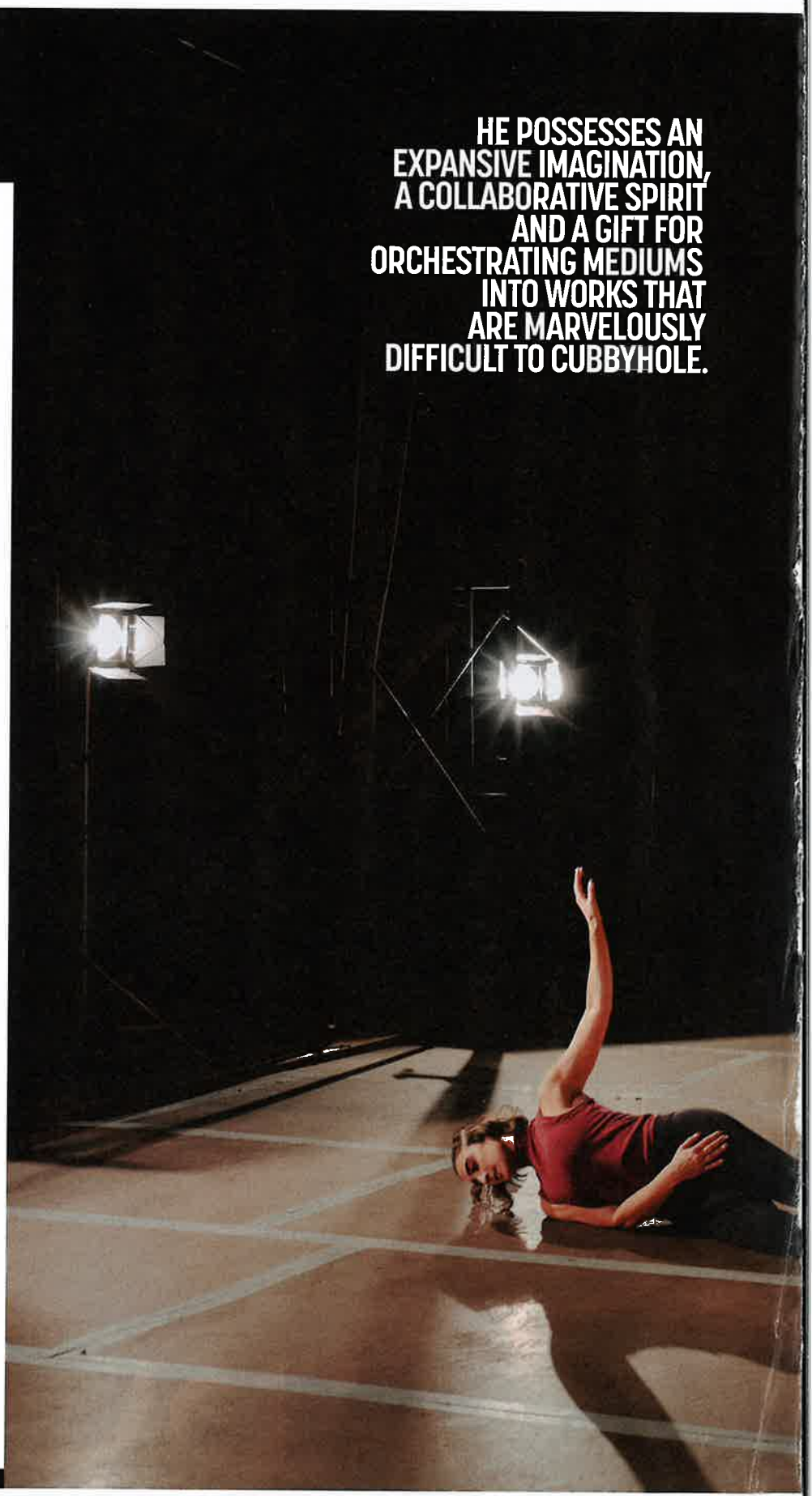
IT STARTED WITH THE BUILDING.

About two years ago, artist Brendan Fernandes was walking through the opulent Driehaus Museum with Lisa Key, the museum's executive director. Key guided Fernandes into a building he hadn't seen before: the Murphy Auditorium, located next to and recently acquired by the Driehaus. "I was like, '*What is this?*'" he recalls, wide-eyed. "I think Lisa saw the wheels in my head turning."

The Murphy Auditorium—likely unknown to most Chicagoans save those who have, say, attended an intimate concert or fancy wedding there—is every bit as architecturally stunning as the adjoining Driehaus Museum, which was originally the Nickerson Mansion and is a dizzying marvel of Gilded Age design. The three-story mansion is crammed with densely ornate woodwork and finishes that vary from room to room, a vestige of the Aesthetic movement of the late nineteenth century. The mansion changed hands in the early twentieth century, after decorative maximalism fell out of vogue. A group of a hundred buyers rescued the building from the wrecking ball and used it to lure the College of American Surgeons to Chicago, who bit and moved into the wood and marble palace.

The College, however, required a proper lecture hall and so commissioned architecture firm Marshall and Fox (the Drake Hotel, the South Shore Cultural Center, the Edgewater Beach Hotel) to design an auditorium, which was constructed next to the mansion in 1926. The Murphy was used for lectures, not as an anatomy theater, curator Stephanie Cristello is quick to clarify, with a tinge of disappointment I shared. "But," she observes, "the context is still very much of the body."

HE POSSESSES AN EXPANSIVE IMAGINATION, A COLLABORATIVE SPIRIT AND A GIFT FOR ORCHESTRATING MEDIUMS INTO WORKS THAT ARE MARVELOUSLY DIFFICULT TO CUBBYHOLE.



previous page: Brendan Fernandes. Photo: Virginia Harold

rators with me. Without them, I don't have my work. I try hard to extend this idea of generosity, kindness, collaboration, which is a big ethos of this exhibition."

Rainer's influence and the spirit of Judson Dance Theater stirred in Fernandes when he stepped into the Murphy Auditorium. Marshall and Fox designed the Murphy after a French Renaissance church, the Chapelle de Notre-Dame-de-Consolation in Paris. Massive stone columns flank bronze doors on Erie Street; ornamental plaster and gold filigree encrust the interior. An enormous, back-lit stained-glass window with the American College of Surgeons emblem towers over thirteen carved wooden thrones. Permanent seating is arranged in a u-shape on the balcony, overlooking the open ground floor. Above, an ocular dome glows with a soft, heavenly light. Entering the space, Fernandes immediately thought of Judson Memorial Church. "[The Murphy] was calling for activation in my mind," he says. "It's in the round—you don't have a proscenium. It's a space for exchange."

Exchange, solidarity, queerness, inclusivity: in the heart of palatial, roaring-twenties grandeur, Fernandes saw the possibility for the ideals undergirding his work to take new form. "In the Round" is the title of the exhibition and performance series Fernandes will create for the Murphy Auditorium (April 9-November 14). The name describes the physical layout of the exhibition space, the activities that will take place within it, and an ethos that Fernandes intends to cultivate. "I'm thinking about the Murphy Auditorium as a space for exchange and giving," he says. "That for me is social and political; we need more of this in the world, especially now. How do we generate this for each other? The idea of 'in the round' is breaking down the architectural barriers of space: you can see each other. Through the lens of Western architecture, we work within straight, ninety-degree walls, linear and parallel. Parallels don't touch. In the round builds visibility and connectivity."

As is customary in his work, Fernandes will connect a web of collaborators. AIM Architecture (Antwerp, Shanghai, Chicago) will construct a circular platform and mirrored benches that can be reconfigured throughout the exhibition period. The Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, where Fernandes was a 2025 artist-in-residence, is producing yards of fabric with excerpts from a score he is writing with Cristello; the words "in the round" are screen-printed in fonts ranging from tiny to huge, in overlapping curves and spirals. Five dancers will perform a piece of durational choreography created by Fernandes, informed by the full score.

Cristello says the written score—or prompts, or poetry—is always a starting point for collaborations with Fernandes

"IT'S IMPORTANT THE DANCE PIECES ARE DURATIONAL, ENDURANCE-BASED, HAVE NO BEGINNING, MIDDLE OR END, AND ARE IMPROVISATIONAL BY NATURE."

and the foundation of his choreography. "There are concrete poems we give to the dancers," she says. "Then there are rehearsals where those words inform the dance movements that end up being choreographed and taught. It's important the dance pieces are durational, endurance-based, have no beginning, middle or end, and are improvisational by nature."

Fernandes is an artist who sees the world in relation to the human body in motion. "I see everything being influenced by movement: clothing, architecture is support and housing for movement, I think of sculpture the same way," he tells me. "I work with film and how cameras are choreographic devices and how cameras capture but also the cameraperson is a performer."

Cristello, soft-spoken and erudite, is a writer who, as she puts it, backed into curating. For her, language animates the artistic process. "I never worked on an exhibition that didn't start with text," she says. "I'm interested in collaborating with the artist, writing about their work and then proposing something. For Brendan and I, it comes from the poetry and the writing. This idea of 'In the Round'—I was thinking about the experience of the rotunda as a communal public space. There are not a lot of public spaces that allow for that. And certainly not within an architectural gem like this one."

Cristello has a longstanding relationship with the Driehaus Museum. She has curated exhibitions in their "Tale of Today" series, which places works by current artists in the lush gallery rooms of the mansion as a means of drawing connections between contemporary ideas and aesthetics to the art of the Gilded Age. Cristello describes the series as "massively successful. People were excited to see something new. You see these types of exhibitions in Europe all the time because they have so many old buildings that need to be retrofitted. The U.S. isn't that old. It is an exciting thing to have the opportunity to have an experience like this in Chicago."

INSTALLING ART IN AN HISTORIC BUILDING COMES WITH LIMITATIONS—NO EMPTY WHITE WALLS, NO NAILS CAN BE HAMMERED INTO WALLS, NO FREIGHT ELEVATORS—THAT CRISTELLO FINDS EXCITING.

Installing art in an historic building comes with limitations—no empty white walls, no nails can be hammered into walls, no freight elevators—that Cristello finds exciting. "These parameters pose really creative conceptual framings for how you approach the work you want to show in the space. In my exhibitions, I've followed the logic that the content and concepts of the work need to resonate with the existing architecture. That's the interesting conversation that can be struck."

For "In the Round"—also a part of the "Tale of Today" series—the constraints of the Murphy Auditorium cracked open a fresh set of creative conceptual framings. Driehaus uses the Murphy as an event space and income-generating rental house; a traditional four-to-six-week art exhibition schedule wouldn't be feasible.

So, Fernandes and Cristello conceived one-week exhibitions with performances, talks and other events that will take shape over the course of six months, with downtime in between. An artistic engagement of that duration calls for the title of "residency," and so "Brendan Fernandes: In the Round" is this as well: an exhibition and performance series with Fernandes serving as the Driehaus Museum's first artist-in-residence.

"One thing that came out of the pandemic," Fernandes says, "I've been pushing certain projects to take time. I just did a yearlong residency with the Notre Dame Initiative on Race and Resilience. I would go back and forth between here and South Bend. It generates a different type of exchange that I'm interested in."

VISITORS TO "IN THE ROUND" WILL EXPERIENCE SOMETHING UNEXPECTED AND NEW EACH DAY. DURING PERFORMANCES, ATTENDEES WILL BE ABLE TO FREELY COME AND GO AS THEY PLEASE, CHOOSE A VANTAGE POINT AT GROUND LEVEL OR VIEW FROM THE BALCONY ABOVE.

Exchange during Fernandes' residency will take several forms—some still in development, like Saturday morning somatic practices, or symposiums via the Critical Dance Cluster Fernandes leads at Northwestern University. Some will evolve over the course of "In the Round." One certainty is that Fernandes will offer the Murphy to his dancers as rehearsal and presentation space for their own projects. Fernandes will present his piece on Thursdays, offering the weekends in the auditorium to a different dancer each week of the run. "Young dancemakers never have space or can't afford it," he says. "A lot are closing, like Links Hall. Even in a temporary way, I can have a hub or incubator."

Visitors to "In the Round" will experience something unexpected and new each day. During performances, attendees will be able to freely come and go as they please, choose a vantage point at ground level or view from the balcony above. Presumably, these attendees will include both contemporary art connoisseurs who may never have visited the Driehaus Museum, and museum visitors stumbling into a contemporary, durational performance piece. In this way, "In the Round" encompasses a wide circle, inviting an expansive audience base in and blurring the line between audience member and participant. Cristello says this is consistent with all of Fernandes' work. "There's never a delineation of 'You are the audience strictly and I'm the performer strictly.' There's a permeable membrane between those experiences."

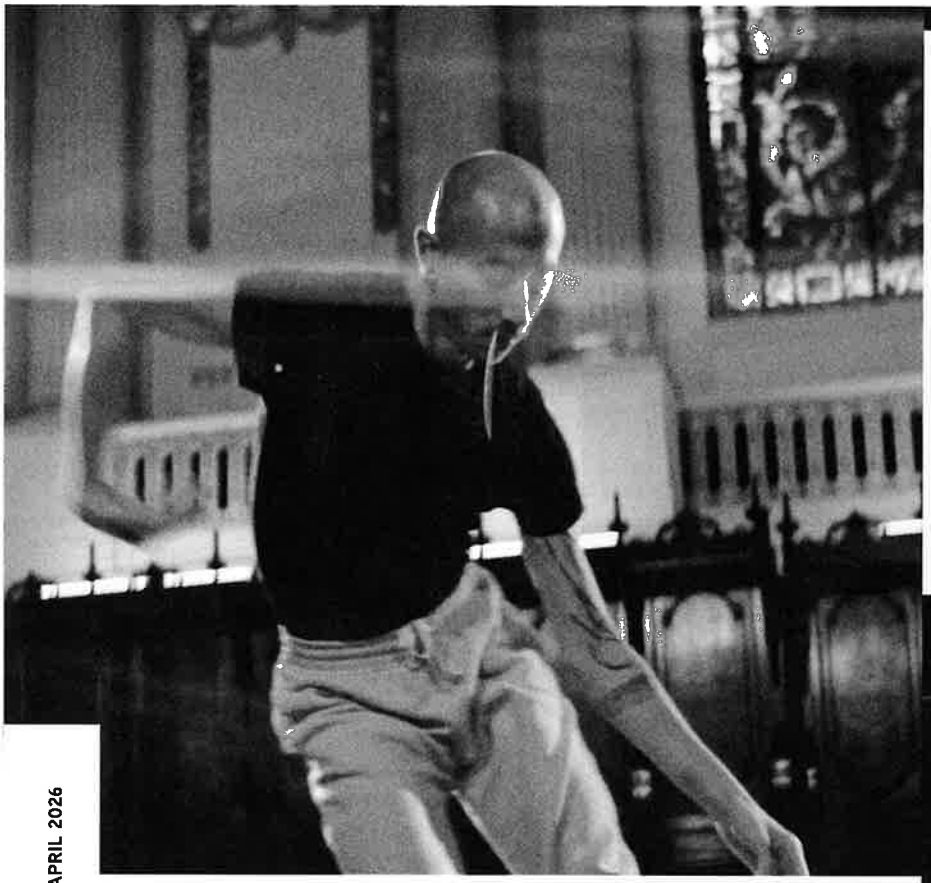
The inclusiveness of Fernandes' creative practice, its expansiveness and generosity both materially and interpersonally is a defining characteristic of his work. Placed amidst opulence of a building from a time of extreme wealth disparity, "In the Round" is a repurposing, a resistance, and an optimistic vision for a future with space for all forms of expression and all ways of being."I think about [my pieces] through queerness," Fernandes says, "We don't need to identify within binaries. We can do and be many things."

Brendan Fernandes, *In the Round (Chicago)*, 2026. Photo by Bob

It's a fascinating history of a stunning if overlooked building: fertile ground for Fernandes, whose work engages classicism through a queer, multihyphenate approach. Fernandes' practice encompasses just about any medium you can name—dance, sculpture and design, textiles and fashion, photography and film—and is often in conversation with the spaces that contain it. "He's the type of artist you can work with in this context," Cristello says. "A dynamic contemporary artist who is constantly shape-shifting concepts to fit architectures and spaces."

Kenyan-born, Canadian-raised and Chicago-based, Fernandes is wildly, nay, impossibly prolific, hopping across the continent and globe to take residencies, give talks and install work. After our interview in the Driehaus offices, he had to rush home to pack for a multi-stop work trip the next day, starting in Mexico City. Despite his packed calendar, Fernandes is warm and open, with the intellectual enthusiasm of a university professor—one needn't draw him out, only take notes—and the confidence of a self-described mid-career artist. He possesses an expansive imagination, a collaborative spirit and a gift for orchestrating mediums into works that are marvelously difficult to cubbyhole. Are his creations performances? Visual art exhibitions? The answer is yes.

Take "72 Seasons," an installation and series of performances Fernandes created in 2021 for the Lurie Garden in Millennium Park, also with Cristello as curator. The city was in pandemic lockdown and many of Fernandes' dance collaborators were suffering the double loss of artistic and service industry income. The two-and-a-half-acre garden designed by Piet Oudolf was a safe venue in which to make and present new work. That work, inspired by the five-day micro-seasons of the ancient Japanese calendar, included hourslong performances by dancers in sculptural costumes spaced along the pathways of the garden. Visitors came and went from August to October, encountering dance (intentionally or not), and perhaps noticing a few of the seventy-two small plant identification tags tucked into the raised beds bearing, not the Latin names of native wildflowers, but short poems by Cristello and Fernandes—poems referencing each



season, which also served as prompts for the dancers. The text remained on display in the garden beds between performances. Poetry, visual design and dance took equal importance in a work of public art that was at once expansive and intimate, kinetic and meditative, accessible yet cryptic.

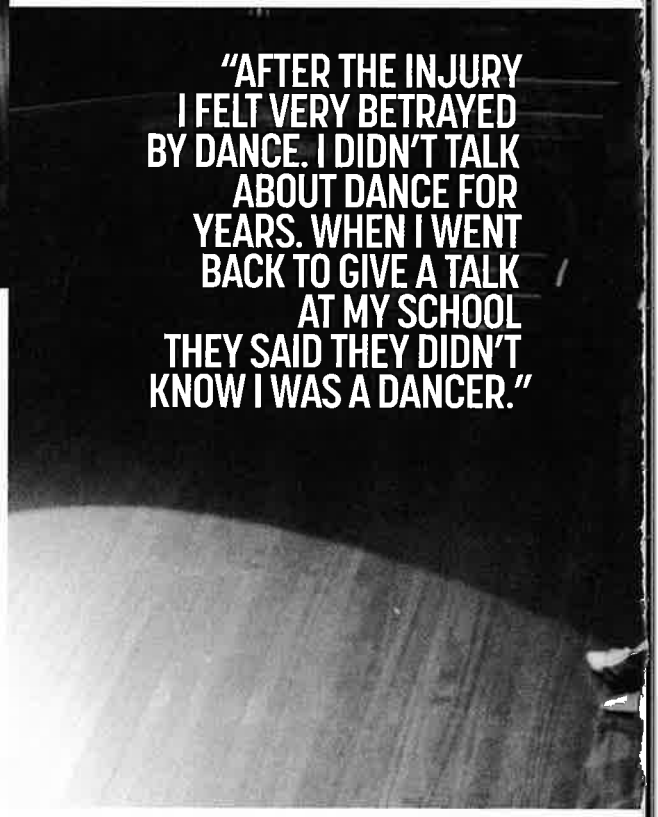
Fernandes didn't start out working across disciplines. Marrying his wide-ranging interests into a single practice came to the artist well after he had completed a dual BFA in dance and visual art. During school, he says he felt pressure to choose between his double majors. "That was the big moment of 'You can't do both, you have to do one or the other and dedicate yourself to that.' I worked myself to the bone," he says. "That's why I'm a good worker. Also, the immigrant status is that you have to succeed. Choosing a vocation of visual art and dance is not an immigrant parent's choice. I thought, 'I have to work at this to be successful.'

"My parents are happy," he adds. "But I don't think they fully get what I do. I think they're happy I'm a professor."

THE IDEA OF 'IN THE ROUND' IS BREAKING DOWN THE ARCHITECTURAL BARRIERS OF SPACE: YOU CAN SEE EACH OTHER.

After receiving his degree, Fernandes focused on dance, training with the Martha Graham company until a torn hamstring turned his attention exclusively to visual arts. "After the injury I felt very betrayed by dance. I didn't talk about dance for years. When I went back to give a talk at my school they said they didn't know I was a dancer."

In 2006 Fernandes studied under dancer and choreographer Yvonne Rainer as part of an independent study at the Whitney Museum in New York. Rainer is one of the founders of Judson Dance Theater, a collective of New York's 1960s avant-garde artists that rejected technique, virtuosity and narrative in performance, in favor of democratic processes and gestural, pedestrian movement. Their multidisciplinary performances stripped away the hierarchical trappings of classical dance theater, paving the way for experimental dance and performance art in the United States as we know it today. The collective—



"AFTER THE INJURY I FELT VERY BETRAYED BY DANCE. I DIDN'T TALK ABOUT DANCE FOR YEARS. WHEN I WENT BACK TO GIVE A TALK AT MY SCHOOL THEY SAID THEY DIDN'T KNOW I WAS A DANCER."

which included in its storied ranks choreographers Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown and Anna Halprin, composer John Cage, artists Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg—took its name from the Judson Memorial Church, where they staged performances defined by improvisation and a process-oriented approach.

Fernandes credits Rainer with inspiring him to reincorporate dance into his artistic practice. "She brought it back out in me," he says. "I found a way to do both. I can still express through my dancers, who are collabo-

this spread: Brendan Fernandes: *In the Round*, courtesy of the artist and the Driehaus Museum. Photo: Siskel/Jacobs Productions.