



FREE FALL

Reflecting on Brendan Fernandes' *Inaction* and Queer Healing

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Coaxing ourselves along the trajectory of healing is inevitably burdensome and complex. For me, it involves an ongoing effort to dodge certain triggers while simultaneously attempting to understand their impact. Artistic representations can account for this required nuance when they take moments of trauma as their primary subject matter. *Inaction*, a solo show by Canadian artist Brendan Fernandes held at the Richmond Art Gallery this past spring, featured several works of performance, video, and sculpture, addressing violence against queer and racialized bodies, and the potential for change through collective action.

As I entered the exhibition for the first time, one video work at the back of the gallery drew me in immediately. *Free Fall: for Camera*, based on Fernandes' 2017 performance piece called *Free Fall*, was created in response to the Orlando shooting at Pulse nightclub in 2016. It explores the act of falling through choreographed movements, featuring 16 dancers who demonstrate the cataclysmic moments when bodies fall onto a stage. Kaleidoscopic imagery is evoked through intertwining bodies and movements reminiscent of film director Busby Berkeley's visionary style in old Hollywood musicals.

Sour memories instantly unearth when I see the dancers' swirling choreography projected on the gallery's back wall. I painfully recall finding out about the Pulse massacre on that early June morning—49 people killed and 53 more injured, constituting the deadliest incident in the history of violence against LGBTQ+ people in the United States. Relating to the victims was inevitable and almost immediate for me, especially having been at a gay bar in downtown Vancouver that same night. I had come out to my family and friends around a year prior, and I was dating a guy I really liked, high off the newfound pride I had worked so hard to achieve. The marginalization and stigmatization of being gay wasn't new to me, but this act of violence felt intensely personal and confrontational, more so than others in my lifetime. People like me, queer and of colour, were specifically targeted in a space that was supposed to be safe for them, a space that was so full of life, celebration, and acceptance. Like the space I was freely enjoying just the night before.

The juxtaposition of finally feeling comfortable in my newfound queer identity forced against an emerging and very real sense of fear for my life was disorienting. How can you fully embrace a sense of self whose full embodiment makes you a direct target for murder? *Free Fall: for Camera* activated a trauma response some five years later—a reminder of how easy it has been to undermine my confidence as a queer person of colour, and how so much of my identity is still predicated upon a feeling of insecurity and being lost.

I wasn't able to and still can't give an objective opinion of this exhibition like I was taught in the first few years of art school. The sweeping gestures of the 16 dancers weaving in and out of each other, falling on top of one another and holding themselves in strong embraces was supposed to evoke a sense of care and community, an outpouring of collective love as a balm to soothe the tragic attack. But all it reminded me of was how shaken I felt watching the news the morning after June 12, 2016. Of imagining what dead bodies piling upon each other on a dance floor looked like. Of having to get off the couch I shared with my parents in that moment to sob silently in the bathroom. Of not understanding why I felt so deeply about this at the time. Of realizing that I am intrinsically linked to the victims because of how I've taught myself to be happy with my identity.

I felt a sense of suspicion seeing the dancers' bodies weave in and out of Berkeleyan compositions—their prismatic visuals enhanced by colourful stage lights. An all too familiar aestheticization of grief made me weary, transforming post-tragedy

care into something pretty that you'd want to share on your Instagram story. It felt like I was being offered another palatable version of care and comfort, something that was clean, organized, and structured, resolving in some beautiful closing scene that sees the victimized group healed. But I'm not healed. Though healing has happened slowly over the years, it's never been a final destination that I've reached, and even when there has been progress, it's been incredibly messy.

An accompanying minimalist sculpture stands at the opposite end of the gallery room, responding to *Free Fall: for Camera*. Composed of several beige poles assembled like scaffolding against an apartment building under renovation, the free-standing arrangement was created in collaboration with Chicago-based architecture firm Norman Kelley. Structures of care come to mind—things like counselling and therapy, but also the support of friends and family. Dancers are invited to move through this structure during a performance, slithering above and under its horizontals, in and out of its verticals.

In a way, this aspect of the exhibition resists my pessimism towards a perceived aestheticization of care in the first piece. I begin to see how the movement of dancers through these static scaffolds represent a transcendence from their implicit rigidity, a space in which these structures of care can be manipulated, can evolve, and can adapt in a multitude of ways. It makes me think about how providing support is a case-by-case diagnosis—the dancers' improvised choreographies speak to that as they respond to their physical context in the moment.

This is the point where I find the true power of Fernandes's work, and its unintentionally sneaky way of revealing where I too need some more healing. *Free Fall: for Camera* reminded me of my own connection to the Pulse massacre and the ways in which it dismantled my newfound yet delusional sense of queer invincibility. Simultaneously, however, it triggered an aversive reaction toward a perceived aestheticization of care and community building after a tragic incident, and exposed my own hurt that still hasn't been processed.

Upon engaging with the accompanying minimalist sculpture, my mixed feelings finally materialized into something palpable. The gaps in my own healing process were made clear, and I was encouraged to think of care and community as something ongoing, ever-changing, and intrinsically malleable because of the performative nature of the accompanying piece. Though concrete structures of care might be offered, they're not always what's appropriate—healing happens in a multiplicity of unknown, untimely, and still uncertain ways.

It's difficult and oftentimes shameful to still feel quite lost in a community that has provided me so much joy, safety, camaraderie, and love. While I've found solid and lasting experiences and relationships that have given me a sense of purpose and direction, it's no longer surprising to be faced with moments that send everything awry. *Inaction* was an astute reminder of that fragility, and allowed me to think about how an element of instability is always present in my experience.

It's important to me to resist a narrative that portrays queer individuals as always marked by trauma and violence. In some ways, this imperative has made my experience all the more difficult. It is absolutely true that these tragic moments have become part of who I am, how I carry myself, and how I see myself in the world—it would be a disservice to me and my communities to deny that. What I continue to try to focus on however, is how I learn, grow, and heal from these moments, acknowledging their existence and trying my best to transform them into something of strength and power.