

Zachary Fabri, Forget me not, as my tether is clipped



Museum Of Art Fort Lauderdale
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The exhibition is strewn about the Museum of Art Fort Lauderdale. “Scattered... as stepping stones for the viewer’s passage through time and space” says the museum’s materials. The videos’ peppered arrangement falls quickly into place, acting as nodes of cultural critique, autonomously growing in the rubbed joints of the museum’s authority. Fabri’s “Me and Them” (2005) is one of the first pieces you encounter upon entering the museum’s expansive lobby.

We watch a handheld camera film a group of young girls in indigenous dress dancing on a hillside street in Darjeeling. Soon, a Caucasian tourist-type joins in the dancing, mimicking the young girls’ choreography as best she can. The young girls seem unmoved, unfazed, neutral. The tourist throws herself into the unfamiliar dance, flailing her limbs, kicking her crisp white sneakers and smiling ear to ear at the camera and to her off-screen counterpart.

The humorous yet awkward interaction lasts less than two minutes, until the tourist eventually tires and walks off screen. Recalling comedic film tropes, personal family experiences, and the stereotype of the loud American tourist, a sting of collective embarrassment hits me as I watched, pondering the question posed in the video’s title, trying to situate myself as a *me* or a *them*. It is this exact confrontation and self-evaluation in cultural contexts that Fabri’s work seeks to elicit.

The second video I encountered was playing from a pillar erected at the entrance of the Bob Adelman exhibition of Civil Rights Era Photography. It was Fabri’s “Fortune’s Bones,” (2012) or at least a two-minute excerpt from the piece, where the artist enters the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and performs an impromptu dance in the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas wing.

Cuts of Fabri dancing, circling, shaking, and chanting in his improvised performance are seen between pans to various artifacts on successive levels of pedestals and in neatly organized display cases. Curious museum-goers watch him, some sit for the performance. Others pass by unaffected, gift-shop souvenirs in

hand, using the gallery as a pass-through and averting their attention.

The accompanying text notes the piece's name as a reference to the skeleton of a slave named Fortune who was "found in a closet and exhibited by the Mattituck Museum"—an anemic summation of the story of Fortune and the town of Waterbury, Connecticut.

Another cultural critique, "Fortune's Bones" confronts and questions acquisition tactics of collecting museums and unearths metaphoric skeletons lurking in our institutional closets. Without a soapbox, Fabri's video propels the current debate surrounding cultural objectification and the ethics of dissemination and display of these "objects."

"Forget me not, as my tether is clipped" (2012) is projected in large scale in the museum's second floor, adjacent to the galleries that house some of the most iconic photographs of the Civil Rights era. Filmed in black and white on 16mm, the almost 15-minute video shows the artist tying helium balloons to tendrils of his dreadlocked hair, walking the storied streets and parks of Harlem cocooned by the balloons, and ultimately cutting and setting free each lock of hair and its helium-filled counterpart.

Fabri makes a failed attempt to fly with his newfound accessories. He is lost inside this mass of balloons, struggling to make use of them and their potential, looking for a way to take on their lighter than air characteristics, in an ultimate failure. What had once promised levity, buoyancy, and a new perspective, is now a clump of plastic balloons clouding his sight, pushing his head back and forth, subject to the whim of the wind. The text states that the video represents the "artist's relationship to history, the ideologies and beliefs that define him and his transformation as he gains experience and knowledge." As the artist literally tethers himself to these elements, they simultaneously hold him up, while weighing him down.