

# Framing the Physical

BY BRIT BARTON



TOSH BASCO, *NO SKY*, performance, Serpentine Park Nights, London, 2021. Photo by Ines Manai. Courtesy the artist; Carlos/Ishikawa, London; Company, New York; and The Serpentine, London.



INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION



# TOSH BASCO

Since the 2010s, Tosh Basco has established an interdisciplinary practice that is marked by an inner drive for improvisation. With past performance venues spanning the Venice Biennale and the Whitney Museum of Art to Berlin's Berghain nightclub, Basco's performative alchemy—evocative and ultimately ephemeral—blurs the boundaries between drawing, sound, and photography, conversely allowing viewers to linger in her works' presence.

In November 2021, the artist opened *Grief Series* at Karma International in Zurich with a collection of new drawings and sound compositions that build on her practice's performative elements. Much like her onstage work, Basco's nonverbal and intuitive approach is evident in the breaths, sighs, and scratches of mark-making captured by audio, and the identifiable traces of her body captured by drawings. In works like *Grief in Blues (Bruise)* (2021) and *Stages / Seasons* (2021), the enigmatic quality of grief as it comes and goes, evolves and adapts, becomes a gesture to record and translate. For Basco, artmaking is ultimately an act of provocative catharsis rooted in a visceral, narrative approach, signifying the chaotic time period her works are created in.

**Reflecting on works like *Untitled Hand Dance* (2019), performed in Venice, and your underground performances as *boychild*, improvisation seems foundational to your practice, which spans drawing, painting, and photography. Can you speak about your initial interpretations of improv? Was the method pure mimicry, based on time slowing down, or something else?**

Initially, improv was a way for me to access things that just needed to be expressed. It took many years to understand or conceptualize my practice through improvisation. The way that I think about performance, particularly improvisation, helps me formulate a different understanding of how I move through my day and how I move through the world. In general I see my art practice as deeply entangled with life; there is not really a separation between the two. Of course, the stage offers me an opportunity to focus on a different kind of imagining. When you abstract yourself and your existence from the world, different kinds of possibilities begin to emerge.



TOSH BASCO, *Remnants*, 2021, looped sound. Photo by James Bantone. Courtesy the artist and Karma International, Zurich.



TOSH BASCO, *Untitled Hand Dance*, 2019. Performance as part of "Meetings on Art," 58th Venice Biennale, 2019. Photos by Riccardo Banfi. Courtesy the artist; Carlos/Ishikawa, London; Company, New York; and Delfina Foundation.



(From left to right) TOSH BASCO, *Graphite Grief Series (Grasp)* and *Graphite Grief Series (Bludgeoned / Prayer)*, 2021, pigment on paper, 76.5×56.5 cm. Photos by James Bantone. Courtesy the artist and Karma International, Zurich.

My drawing practice is derived from my performance practice and indirectly in conversation with photography. Along with collaboration, there is a kind of—I was going to say triangulation, although I mentioned four different aspects of my work—but there are interwoven relationships between different facets of my practice: the performance, the photography, the drawings, and the paintings. There is a lot of triangulation, movement, and the unfolding of each aspect into another.

**Do you have a lexicon or a language of movement that varies within your practice?**

I don't know exactly where the movement comes from, except that it is a need that I do not have the words for. I say that because I'm not trained in any particular discipline with movement. Rather, I am drawing from a lexicon of visual language. I also often look for movements that I encounter in life. In the beginning, I was—I think subconsciously—pulling from statuesque, Greek, sculptural positions in the body. For me, the omnipresence of certain positions demonstrates that something exists that can be understood or recognized as a visual language, regardless of where you come from.

Earlier in my practice, there was a lot of grotesque and absurd figuration in my body, working between the mutations of beauty and horror. I wouldn't necessarily say abject, but I contorted the body in a way that might challenge our understanding of what a body is, of this strain of the body. That came from my experience of horror and violence that I encountered as a trans person of color. I wanted to ride the line between accepted notions of beauty and the disgust that my body and my being incurred.

I gain inspiration from many sources, from text, poetry, softness, stillness. But when it comes to a language of movement, over the years I've created my own vocabulary, my own compositional discourse or dictionary that is rooted in these movements. That language centers around the fact that there is a very particular way in which my body tends to want to move.

**Your performances begin and end as ephemeral intuitive works that can't be redone in sequence or returned to quite the same way as an exhibition can. Does drawing offer you a speed or certainty that performance doesn't?**

Yes and no. The processes between the practices are different, the materials are different. Drawing offers a different kind of space of reflection for me, as the performer, and generally as the person on stage. It allows me to see something that I otherwise would never be able to physically see and, actually, something that I will never be able to see: my own performance, from the audience's perspective. I have a different sense of vision when it comes to my movements.

**Throughout the works in the *Grief Series*, we see a lot of your imprints: finger prints, palms smeared, traces of a foot in motion and a lot of quick mark-making. Is drawing therefore an extension to seeing the previously invisible parts of your performance?**

The drawings initially served as a way for me to understand what it is that I'm seeing and also to portray the things that I see when I do perform. There's a textural quality, there's a color, there's a weight to the movements in performance and everyday life, which also appear to me when I hear words or think about ideas. That is, when I'm reading or listening to music, there is a color composition that wants to move through my body, and that is what the performance becomes. For me, drawings are really just another offering of the movement, another way to engage with the need that is the movement. The process of drawing also offers another set of rules, tools, and materials to make meaning around the movement, and I like that it engages with a different history.

Before I step on stage, there's a step in my process of conceiving the work, where I try to see the performance in my mind. I start to envision the entire thing, and when that vision coalesces into something continuous, when I can see the whole performance, then I know that I'm ready. It takes a lot of preparation for me to get to that point: I engage in research, sometimes writing, often, but not always, specific kinds of training for my body, thinking about staging, considering how people will encounter the work and the physical space. But when it comes down to it, when I'm on stage, I will never see what the audience sees.

**In 2021, you exhibited "Portraits, Still Lives, and Flowers," at Carlos/Ishikawa, and a striking shot of a tulip, *Untitled (2020)*, decaying became the cover image of *ArtForum* magazine. How does your process of expressing or conceptualizing movement relate to your photographic practice?**

All of my artmaking concerns capturing a particular moment. When I think about the relationship between different aspects of my practice, I am reminded that I learned to produce images through performance. In some ways, I am always thinking about the essence of a moment.

Essence is a scary word because of how things can be essentialized. But thinking about the nuance or the softness of a moment or a memory and infusing it with feeling, that's something I learned how to do through photography. When I make images, they are not planned. Yet, improvisation doesn't resonate very strongly when I think about photographs and my relationship with them.

**Is photography for you a more literal representation, compared to drawing, which might signify an abstract representation?**

I feel the opposite. I reject that a photograph is more literal or true than a drawing, although that is a widely accepted notion. For me, drawing offers a more direct representation of the way I experience movement. In my drawings, I make similar considerations to my performances in the way that I think about, for example, the makeup and costuming, or about the cadence of my movements. Ultimately, a performance and a drawing are two different ways of presenting an assemblage of movements.

When I make drawings, I think about how someone will encounter the materials. Initially, I thought of the piece of paper as a stage. That conception is definitely in the lineage of David Hammon's work, especially his body prints, but it also follows artists like Trisha Brown's or Carolee Schneeman's transcription-based methodology to movement. Ana Mendieta's work is also inspirational in that regard.

I think of the drawings as being in conversation with language, especially when I'm working with materials like graphite. Compared to some of the more makeup-based materials (synthetic mica, for example) that reference drag, graphite offers me a way to think about writing; about transcription, impermanence, sketching; about inserting a voice that is in a different language than, but simultaneously in conversation with, writing. It is not photographic, but it is referential in the same way that a document is. Drawing then becomes an archive of challenging and envisioning movement.



TOSH BASCO, *Still Life?*, 2021, C-print mounted on aluminum with frame, 32.5×42.6×3.3cm. Courtesy the artist; Carlos/Ishikawa, London; and Company, New York.



TOSH BASCO, *Grief in Blues (Scrawl)*, 2021, pigment on paper, 42×30 cm. Photo by Flavio Karrer. Courtesy the artist and Karma International, Zurich.

**Because your work is so emotive and enigmatic, there is a lot of room for interpretation. How do you think about the psychological or psychoanalytic perspective of your work?**

I don't think of my drawings as being analytical, but I feel very open to how people encounter the work. I do sometimes feel nervous about affect and feeling because of how the world values essentialized, quantifiable, or logical modes of understanding, as opposed to emotive methods.

The performance work is geared more toward a different approach to thinking, a different approach to understanding, and a different approach to being in space with others. My performances are an offering to the audience, an attempt to soften the ways in which you've been taught that the world is fixed. Improvisation is also relevant here, because it has taught me a lot about the space between, around, above, and through what I initially was taught was fixed.

**Do you consider the afterlife of your work? What is it that you think of to frame the durational quality of work?**

It depends. One of the more beautiful things about experiencing this performance practice over time is seeing the way that my work lives on through others. I enjoy encountering people along the way who say, "Oh, I saw your performance five years ago or ten years ago." It's almost like a time capsule, that kind of memory space, that lives in or through people. That is really very moving and impactful for me.

I don't think much about the drawings after I make them, but it has been interesting to consider the materials through time, as well as mortality and the desire for "forever." Having to think about the archiving of the work brings me back to questions about mortality; our fear of dying or perishing. Regardless, I am more interested in thinking about other topics. I think about systems of power often. I think about love a lot. I think about the action of love and different ways of care and how to show up to life in different ways, which may alter how we perceive and treat one another in this world.

Because of those considerations, it is difficult to think about what I'm going to make. I usually have to prepare myself in a way that aligns with my thought processes in order for my intentions to come through in a clear way. I guess that is always the goal of an artist.

**Tosh Basco** was born in California and rose to prominence in the drag scene in San Francisco in the 2010s. Well known for her movement-based performances under the name boychild, Basco's photography and drawing accompany the performance practice. Viewed as a whole, Basco's work attempts to enfold language, becoming, and representation together in spaces where they are presumed to exist as discrete entities. She is co-founder of the collaborative entity Moved by the Motion with Wu Tsang, and collaboration remains a vital aspect of her work.

**Brit Barton** is an artist and writer based in Zurich and Chicago. She received her MFA from the University of Chicago and is currently shortlisted as a critic for the Swiss Art Awards.