

PORTRAIT TOSH BASCO

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THE SIDE OF GRACE

© 2014 MoMA PSI, New York



Tosh Basco, *The Future*, with Korakrit Arunanondchai
Performance, MoMA PSI, New York, 2014

It's tragic the way the body fights with time and gravity. US American artist Tosh Basco (formerly known as boychild) unleashes improvised performances of twirling movements, or drawings filled to the teeth with angst. In her new works, grief becomes a way of agitating the body to a fuller feeling of life.

By Geoffrey Mak

In California, where I had been sheltering in place, the brushfires were evaporating entire swimming pools in their wake. Ash was still wafting from the sky, like snowflakes, when I got the news that Enzo's boyfriend, Fabrizio, had died. Their love was like a compass to me. Now that Fabrizio was gone, I felt bereft. I said that to Enzo over Zoom. And even though I didn't quite believe this at the time, I told him that if life is parceled out between suffering and grace, then grief must fall on the side of grace. Of course, this isn't true. Grief is a savage thing that robs a person of what makes them human. "I sincerely believe that some wounds never fully heal. They transform us, permanently," Enzo wrote in a memorial letter to Fabrizio. "I think that you will haunt me for the rest of my life."

Two years later, I saw Tosh Basco's drawing *Garden of Grief (pink)* (2021) from her "Grief Series." On tinted paper, Basco's strokes of charcoal, eggplant, and cobalt stir in a dense thicket, churning outward in wisps of ghostly, rapid lethargy. Fuchsia strokes claw across smeared Prussian

blues. Foggy smudges of moss breathe over an insistent, centrifugal density. This mass of color, thick with anguish, appears whirling in motion, losing possession of its insides as an entity leaking outside of itself, to where I could not tell what was within and without. Basco, who made these drawings after a family member was murdered, said, "The grief that was initially acute, unequivocal, seemingly individual, opened up to reveal grief as subtle, accumulative, collective or global." This is the kind of grief that, no less than a piercing insanity, corrodes the boundary between subject and object. To grieve is to become porous to time, activated with everyone who has ever grieved and everyone who ever will. Boundaries crack, and the self spills out. One becomes an unbound, throbbing, and unwilling empathy.

As I gazed into this drawing, my face collapsed and I wept – muttering, grimacing. I was grieving, even if I did not yet know what I was grieving for. Each of Basco's *Grief* drawings imprint a body that was once in motion but is no longer



Safi still life, 2021
C-Print mounted on aluminium, 32.5 x 43 x 3 cm

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Garden of grief (pink), 2021
Pigment on paper
65 x 50 cm



*Graphite grief series
(grace gleaned through teeth)*, 2021
Pigment on paper, 76.5 x 56.5 cm

© Tosh Basco 2022. Courtesy: the artist, Carlos/Ishikawa, London, and Karma International, Zurich. Photo: James Bantone

Memory isn't so much archival as it is a seeking of vitality, a truer, more nearly complete present tense.

present. What we see are the traces of hands and fingers soiling colors across paper. As Peter Schjeldahl writes, "Death is like painting rather than like sculpture, because it's seen from only one side." And so Basco's drawing might vivify from the side of life, with all the rage, defiance, and humiliation of a dying body. With subtitles like "grace gleaned through teeth" and "conversation with my soul," her graphite works read as recorded movement, as if to prove that a body was once alive. As an index of a person in absentia, the drawings are a record of where it *has* been. It is the body that grieves, that loves, that aches.

The body is the central node from which all Basco's work extends. She is mostly known as a performance artist, who has shown work at the Venice Biennale; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; and Gropius Bau, Berlin. She has staged hundreds of pieces, the vast majority of which are not

documented, insisting upon an embodied present – you were either there, or you weren't.

When I watched Basco perform *Untitled Lip Sync (for Ana Mendieta)* (2018) at Gropius Bau, she was dancing in silence upon a massive, Baroque-style curtain which unfurled diagonally from the ceiling, its ruffles and twists undulating across the floor. To watch her move, aware of my presence only in the general, rather than specific sense was to catch her in moments between inwardness and self-consciousness, absorbed in private feelings, which I was not allowed to see, but whose trace could be glimpsed from the outside, in her caprice, her fatigue, her longing. Only as I reconstruct this memory in my mind can I climb my way into what took place that afternoon. "Memory, then, isn't so much archival as it is a seeking of vitality, harmony, an evocation of a truer, more nearly complete present tense," writes



Still life?, 2021
C-Print mounted on aluminium
32.5 x 43 x 3 cm

John Edgar Wideman. Through the transparency of contiguous and overlapping memories, I see suddenly, on that curtain, for a moment only, a brown, semi-nude body kneeling, limp arms akimbo, as she slowly lowers her back until her scapulas kiss the fabric. Of course, this never happened. I am transplanting a gesture I saw in a video of her (*Moved by the Motion: Spooky Distancing*, 2017) and simulating it in my mind as if it had happened at Gropius Bau. There is no documentation of that performance. I have no recollection of it. Memory dreams the more time passes. It's been four years.

It was Jack Halberstam who said that we aren't queer by our sex acts but by the way we do time. It was Michel Foucault who said that we aren't queer by "the psychological traits and the visible masks of the homosexual" but by the way

we live. It was Lee Edelman who said that queer time is present time, "no future" time, against heteronormative time, reproductive time, baby time, capitalist time.

Basco's performance art can be seen as a way of queering time: inhabiting the present with a trans and Filipino body that marks time with breath. As a college dropout, Basco began performing at the queer "Club Something" parties at The Stud bar in San Francisco. As her drag persona, boychild, she performed *Untitled Lip Sync* (2012–17) covered in Kryolon makeup, sometimes with white contacts. She sees her lip-syncing practice, over the years, as opening up a "portal" or "channel" through which text flows, whether by Rihanna or, in later iterations, where she is not explicitly mouthing words, José Muñoz. In the early lip syncs, she performed to remixes by deconstructed DJs like



Wu still life, 2021
C-Print mounted on aluminium
43 x 32.5 x 3 cm

"I suspect that time will no longer exist.
The sky will follow."



A stage, 2021
C-Print mounted on aluminium
43 x 32.5 x 3 cm



Safi, 2021
C-Print mounted on aluminium
56 x 43 x 3 cm



Still life Zürich, 2021, C-Print mounted on aluminium, 56 x 43 x 3 cm (detail)



Some kind of semblance, 2021, C-Print mounted on aluminium, 43 x 32.5 x 3 cm (detail)



Bouquet, 2021
C-Print mounted on aluminium
32.5 x 43 x 3 cm

Total Freedom, who might layer samples like Destiny's Child vocals over 80s ballroom tracks. "As a drag queen you get to play with the remix and interpretation or storytelling of these histories," Basco has said. She cites chopped and screwed music, a way of elongating a vocal sample at a lower pitch, as a revelation for how to slow down time. "This and other techniques of remix taught me the liquidity of time, taught me how to do this with my body as well as with sound."

All Basco's performances are improvised, which is a queer temporality, because queerness is contingency. If choreography is a way of planning for a predetermined future, improvisation deliberately frustrates both eventualities by inhabiting an indexical present wide open to possibility. In video documentation of *NO SKY* (2021) – a durational performance featuring the artist, a reading by Sophia Al-Maria, and Kelsey Lu on cello and vocals – Basco is shown silhouetted and bowed over one knee, with one arm, raised above like the stem of a dandelion, wafting languidly overhead. Light limns Basco's body with chiaroscuro. "I suspect that time will no longer exist / The sky will follow," Al-Maria reads from Etel Adnan's poetry collection *Time* (2019). Elbows raised, Basco's fingers drape down her ears, her neck, and her shoulders as Lu plucks a single

string, strengthening the more it trembles, thrumming according to tempo.

A body against time and gravity is a tragic thing. To watch Basco float, as if suspended underwater, is to witness a heroic act. In fits and spins, she divides the air as if fighting away hornets, brows furrowed, until her torso slows in a delicate decrescendo, back lowered like a death drop arrested in midair, waiting and heaving as her arms raise over her to meet at the hands. As she is frozen here, the eye can watch tiny shivers sluice down her torso. "Fate moves imperceptibly along a path I might not see." One second Basco's hands flutter, fingers dappling the air. Another, her head thrashes, lips pursed open. Even her shadows dance. Time, as transparent as water, coagulates around each gesture, a unique moment which carries with it everywhere Basco's body has ever been, every motion, in a heroic strike to carry both history and memory into a more vivified present, in all its fullness, if only in the twinkling of an eye, before it slips away not even a second after it is noticed. "I will slow time down if you let me suspend the air," Al-Maria reads. "Suspend the air."

During the initial outbreak of COVID-19, Basco turned to photography to capture pandemic time. Before she began as a performance artist, she

Grief, an index upon the heart, extends the presence of what has been.

practiced photography, taking after her father, a hobbyist. The works in her series "Portraits, Still Lives and Flowers" (2021) are photographs of other photographs in stacks. She began capturing her home life in lockdown, pictures which she printed and arranged piles to themselves be shot. Each of these surface photos presents otherwise forgettable scenes from the relentless routine of life in isolation, during which a merciless monotony had its way of distorting time and therefore memory. *Wu Still Life* (2021) shows the artist Wu Tsang wrapped in a blanket, face turned to the wall. *Still Life ?* (2021) shows a bouquet of wilting tulips – the moment when life drains visibly. For so many, 2020 and 2021 felt timeless. Wednesdays became indistinguishable from Saturdays, and an unprecedented period of mass death was marked, unceremoniously, by a boredom so inebriating that it could blot out memories.

To photograph isolation was to fight against this insouciant march of time, against forgetting. But the mind can't help but forget. Beneath every rescued memory are countless others that are lost, like the prints in the stacks, now permanently occluded from view. Rejected or repressed or forgotten. Perhaps Basco herself no longer remembers what those photos were. In the absence of fact and documentation, the mind resorts to imagination to envision what once was to, even if by losing the specificity of memory, complete the present, charge it with meaning. This is when I knew that the covered photographs represent the dead.

"Listen to me plead for your life though even in the dream I know you're already dead," writes Elisa Gonzalez. "How do I insure my desire for grief is never satisfied?" As a mode of memory,

grief intervenes upon time in its refusal to let death be assimilated into the past. Grief, an index upon the heart, extends the presence of what *has been*. Basco's audio piece *Remnants* (2021), also part of "Grief Series," is a nine-minute soundscape of breath that simulates weeping. The kind that unravels the body, losing motor control. While Basco's dances often appear controlled and elegiac, *Remnants* is beastly, unfettered, primitive. There is no decorum. A hum, bereaved and affronted, initiates the score, with sighs of worn, bewildered patience that has long run out but still endures, either by will, or compulsion. I hear a haze of whispers, sleeves across skin. She sucks in her breath, snarling, wincing, as if deliberately agitating a wound, a note that sounds not altogether healthy. Clicks and murmured half-words tumble as if she were speaking in tongues. "There is no end," she mutters gutturally, spitefully, wide awake yet disbelieving that there could be this much pain. "So much," she mumbles, before devolving into babbling.

Animalistically, Basco pants and pants, and then shivers in confused, masochistic raving that seems irresistible to her. It unveils the erotic tenor of grief. As I listen to Basco's breath, I notice, at certain intervals, that my own aligns with hers in a space that, however briefly, we share in an indecent intimacy. When she pauses, I, too, pause. Her breath stills, and my breath stills. Silence pools like dripping saliva. Through the transmission of sound waves, grief can be felt in the body and shared as it vibrates across other bodies, as a way of resurrecting the presence of the dead, and it is an unholy thing. To hear a soul screaming against its own finitude. Between suffering and grace, this, too, falls on the side of grace.

TOSH BASCO (b. 1988, USA) is an artist based in Zurich. She has recently staged performances at *Gropius Bau, Berlin; the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia; The Shed, New York; Whitney Biennial, New York* (all 2022); *Serpentine Gallery, London* (2021); *Performa 19, New York* (2019). Recent solo exhibitions took place at *Karma International, Zurich; Carlos/Isbikawa, London; Company Gallery, New York* (all 2021).

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