

TOSH BASCO

CARLOS/ISHIKAWA



VISTAS

TOSH BASCO: HOLDING SPACE

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Holding

SPACE

Formerly known as boychild, a moniker that embraced myriad explorations at the fringes of being human, Tosh Basco now returns to a vulnerable, fleeting, porous self. Stemming from her intersectional identity, and entangled feelings of non-belonging and erasure, her performances are rooted in improvisational movement as a mode of survival and world-building—a subtle testament to the ungraspable nature of living. PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEE WEI SWEE
INTERVIEW BY X ZHU-NOWELL
ALL CLOTHING: LORO PIANA

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XZU-NOWELL Tell me where you are.

TOSH BASCO I am in my studio. It's a Sunday, and I really wanted to be home, but I'm glad to come in here, because the proximity to my work helps me to think about it. This is the luxury of studio practices: having a place to both hold and release ideas.

XZN What is the studio practice to you?

TB It's something that I've been longing for. For three or four years, I had a studio in LA. But, because of my performance practice, I was rarely able to actually be in it. I've been fortunate to travel a lot; I loved performing and getting to share that work with people in different places, but it's been very difficult to have a home. There was a part of me that was getting really tired and burnt out—the golden ticket became the golden cage. There's a lot of research and visioning that goes into my performances, notations and a lot of reading. And so, for me, the studio is like a notebook, a place for the ideas to manifest, where transcripts of the movements over time can live.

There's so much information, imagery, and data we take in these days. I went to bed having seen the videos of the Evin Prison in Tehran burning. I woke up seeing other videos of someone walking a fashion show on social media, then a photo of one my friends in their room, followed by a video of police violence in the USA. I was reminded of this essay by Marguerite Duras where she was processing Foucault's death after she heard about it on a newscaster. Foucault was a dear friend of hers. So she was hearing the news of a friend's death, and then the newscaster immediately moved on to some other unrelated news. The studio practice is a way to help me slow down and process it all.

XZN You often talked about how your performance work started in the clubs of San Francisco. I am curious what happen before San Francisco.

TB I don't usually share the before. The early years of my performance career were fast-moving, a trajectory I didn't choose but ran with. I started in drag bars and clubs and the underground queer nightlife in San Francisco, and it accelerated very quickly in a way that I was not prepared for—an ambiguous place between the nightlife scene and the fashion world.

There was this way in which my image was used in those years that was so fixated on an ambiguity of my identity, which I was constantly trying to escape. I think the thing that comes before boychild is rather ordinary. It's a lot of mundane suburban American life, a lot of stuff that I've been thinking and working through these last couple of years: behind-the-scenes, family, generational trauma. I'm half-Filipino and half-white which has informed the way I think about trans identity. Trans in the sense of bouncing around many gender identities, but it's also intersectional, and the intersection is multiplying every day within the moving landscape of life. How I am perceived changes very much depending on where I am in the world. It also changes with time.

When I think about trans, I think about the way that I relate to my parents and the two sides of my family; there was a lot of movement back and forth in my adolescence. "Trans-" always had its connotations as a prefix, to move beyond, across, through. It is kinetic. I have a background of playing a lot of sports. I never trained in dance. I think as a young queer person, I really found solace in moving my body. But I don't usually talk about it, because I don't know if any of it's really spectacular or special. No one ever left the city that I am from. My parents still live near there.

XZN The mundanity becomes very profound when talking about an artist that now is under the spotlight. The consumption and gaze that comes with it in the context in which you're working—whether it is the nightclub, promoter culture, or fashion—demands a certain kind of legibility or certain kinds of distinction, in such contrast to the mundane. Going back to your practice, I'm interested in the shift of using your name Toshi Basco, moving away from boychild.

TB I see the all the different kinds of work that I do as being entangled rather than separated. It's always in movement and in conversation with everything else. The work I did as boychild is still present in the work I make as Toshi. My performance practice is really rooted in improvisational movement, in the non-fixity of things. It is testament to living and life as ungraspable, uncapturable. I really loved going into places where people might not... Like in niche spaces underground, queer

ART PUSHERS
 FORM:
 IT PUSHERS
 UNDERSTANDING:
 IT PUSHERS
 LANGUAGE.



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nightlife in San Francisco, or LA, or New York. As a young person I sought out the freaks like me, the kinds of people I didn't see growing up. These spaces became vital for my survival and my happiness and knowing that I was allowed to exist, and I'm so grateful for that. But I also became very exhausted. I performed hundreds of performances in the first five years of my career in nightlife in cities around the world. I did it to the fullest, and then I started to really value performing for people that might not be in a nightclub, people that might not know what art is or might not know what drag is.

Now, several years later I am in a different place. I am in residency at a state theater in Zurich which is a dance context very different from the art and fashion worlds, even though we're in an age where these things are intermingling more than ever. Somehow, where I come from, a very disjointed family, that intermingling has kind of always been true in a very suburban and mundane way. Having experienced many different cultures from a very young age (also with the families of my Mexican stepdad and Vietnamese stepmom) I understood the disparity or difference that can exist in one person or in a family. I think to become Toshi Basco was really to return to a vulnerable, fleeting, moving self that is porous.

boychild allowed me to explore things that were outside of being "human." A lot of people used to tell me I was "So alien, so Leigh Bowery." And for me, that was always a funny sentiment, because it is something as simple as makeup that allows for that otherworldly transformation. For me, then, anyone could be an alien; we all have access to this slippery transformative place. The word "human" too has a lot of complicated implications about the body, about sovereignty, about who is allowed to be. I like to traverse the places that are open or shifting but sometimes missed.

When thinking about the body I can't help but think of its permeability, its softness, its many borders, and how these edges are constantly in flux. There are a lot of people whose work I've been thinking through that past years in this regard. Denise Ferreira da Silva, Karen Barad, Fred Moten or Fernando Zalamea (who I was fortunate to perform with a few years

ago), their work has helped me to think about these seemingly fixed categories (race, gender, body), through physics, philosophy, poetry and math.

And so Toshi Basco—being me—the intention was to allow myself to share the parts of my thinking and my artistic practice that people don't know, because I think people really affiliated boychild with a certain kind of movement-based performance that always had makeup, staging, and music. It was the thing that actually taught me how to break the boundaries of the fixity, until it started to enclose it.

XZN Originally, it was some sort of a comfort to find a community or a certain kind of acceptance to be the alien that you are and the alien that we all are. But at the same time, the external consumption and assumption fixed and fixated what *boychild* can be. It's almost like you're being captured—you, Toshi Basco, being captured by boychild. I'm curious to see how the categorization we talked about plays out in your studio practice. Theater is a very particular space and drawing is also another very particular place, and so is writing and performance. I'm curious to see how you negotiate these boundaries of division, which also, again, are falsely established in the first place, but at the same time, do need that kind of specificity. I don't think you're arguing for a universal articulation of constant fluidity that doesn't have shape—you're still asking for specificity and how we move through different specificities. But I wonder how that manifests in your practice.

TB It's really important to distinguish the difference. Denise Ferreira da Silva has a really beautiful essay that I worked with for a while with my collaborative group, *Moved by the Motion*, and also just in my own practice, called "On Difference without Separability" (2016). She talks about the world as a plenum rather than this universal whole. And that challenges the notion of a whole, of a discreet single subject, and I like to bring that into the way I think about my work.

Sometimes I still think of all the performance that I'll do in my life as one series. That maybe, life is the practice somehow. There's also this fragment of a poem that we work with by Fred Moten, that goes, "The work is all and not at all, and all in all, and all in nothing." I've been trying to focus on

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staying present, while having to interface with the many different worlds that I encounter or that are put on me. It's really easy to be isolated right now. I'm just trying to connect and process as best I can and do the healing that is necessary for myself to engage in a better and different and new world, worlds that are ongoing, that will hopefully allow someone next to me or in my wake survive in a better place. It's a way to help me process it all, because I can't think about it all. It can't all live through thinking. In fact, it's so much about the processing and thinking through the body. And that's why movement is so vital and important to me. It's the way I communicate.

XZN We're in a very critical moment in time where the definition or the role of artists and thinking about what art is and does are shifting. I would love you to talk a bit about your understanding of what art does.

TB It's a hard one to talk about, because of where I come from. There was only a small art museum and a railroad museum in the city that I grew up in, or like maybe a Gold Rush museum, that you go to when you're a small kid at school. I come from a place of feeling locked out of language, of not belonging; for a long time I didn't feel like I had permission to be a part of art somehow. I come from a working-class family. There's no art culture where I'm from. The internet wasn't really a thing yet. And so, for many years, I didn't feel like I understood art—which I find quite funny now, because I think art's purpose in many ways is to question exactly that notion of "understanding" or questioning what you think you "know." I'm into the subtle, nuanced conversations that you can have through art, that you can't have through pop culture. There is a powerful argument for pop culture that I struggle with a lot, which is the accessibility of the message that a pop star—

XZN The virality of circulation.

TB Yes. Millions of people can hear the message, but the price is that the message gets watered down. I think that the proliferation of a message and the ability of a nuanced discourse is lost when you're talking to millions of people. This is where I think poetry and music and art are very powerful places of expression. It pushes form; it pushes understanding; it pushes language. The longer I have an art practice, or that I am an "artist" in quotation marks, the more I realize it's just a place for me to understand that I just don't know. We just don't know. Or, among the things we've learned along the way, hopefully we also realized that everything we know is always shifting, moving, changing.

When we're talking about the studio practice, for me, it's always in conversation with the world, art is... The word that's coming up right now is "synesthesia." And because I felt locked out of language for many years, for most of my life, actually—I always hit a wall with English.

XZN Which is your mother tongue.

TB It took me a long time to be in touch with my voice. For various reasons, language shut me down, I had become silenced in big and small ways. As a person that makes so many things and nothing at the same time. I'm referring to all the drawings or photos compared to performance which is totally ephemeral. There is in a way a sense of movement, but also placelessness? So the studio has become a place where I can tether my experience and ground. To actually hold space, physical space that is not just ephemeral, has been really important. As a queer person, when you reach back or look to history, erasure is a part of that history. And so for me to inhabit space and have something that will be here when I'm not here actually is very powerful.

XZN You're not trying to write a history, right? Instead what you're doing now is leaving a trace rather than setting a tone of a certain narrative.

TB I am definitely not trying to write history. If I am to relate it to history, it is to re-write the way we make space for different kinds of people to exist and be remembered. I love being in

conversation with people before me who've inspired me. I do that a lot with my titling. It'll be kind of like geography or footnotes: I'll just put a person's name as the title sometimes, depending on what the work is.

XZN That's so important, because erasure happens way too often.

TB I think there's this tradition of taking, but for me, the taking can also be an opportunity to give back? It can be both if done with consideration, thoughtfulness, and care. To remain open is really important somehow, because I think my ability to exist is in the wake of so many other existences that might not have been recognized before.

XZN Speaking of connection, I want to talk about intimacy in your work. It comes through in a very subtle and poetic way.

TB Intimacy is definitely a piece of all the other things we've been talking about—intimacy, vulnerability, deciding to move away from the moniker of boychild and be myself. I've stopped becoming surprised at my surprise of how things are. Does that make sense? Some thing or another, some shocking event happens in the world and I'm surprised, and then at some point I realized that the work is to try to understand the pattern and to break it. The pandemic was really an opportunity to pause. We live in a capitalistic, progress-driven society—at least in the West. There's this push to be working all the time, to do stuff all the time. On my way to have this phone call, I was looking up at the sky, and there were just so many lines from planes, and I remembered in 2020 looking up into the sky and not seeing planes and thinking, *this is the only time in my life that I'll ever see this*. The through line of my photographs is this simultaneous mundanity and the intimacy, the cherished moments that I subconsciously want to hold on to forever—which I know we can't. I am reading this book about a form of Tibetan Buddhism, they say you can only take your karma with you. Everything else will go; everything else will change which reminds me of one of my favorite lines from Octavia Butler: "All that you touch / You Change. / All that you Change / Changes you. / The only lasting truth / is Change."

I mentioned this when we were talking about identity: capture, grasp, fixity, are things I'm trying to move away from, and the power of performance is its ephemerality. I also have this really deep desire to photograph. When photographing flowers, which I did compulsively during the first years of the pandemic, there was this coming to terms with two things in me that I could not otherwise consolidate—knowing that the flowers will die, and still wanting them, still wanting to immortalize them. Or the sky—there's these moments that are so beautiful, and you know that there's going to be another sunset, you know there's going to be another full moon, but you want so bad to hold onto the thing that you can't hold on to. So you try to photograph it.

XZN We started talking about you and your notes as a holding space, your studio as a holding space. And your photography is a holding space, too—of memories, of experience, of fleeting things. I think that somehow, the action of holding encapsulates a lot of your work. *K*

Tosh Basco was born in Sacramento, California, in 1988, and raised in San Francisco. She has performed widely at venues such as the Stedelijk Museum, Gropius Bau, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

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