

Bosco Sodi: *Básico*
Christian Viveros-Fauné

Pared down to its barest essence, wabisabi is the Japanese art of finding beauty in imperfection and profundity in nature, of accepting the natural cycle of growth, decay, and death. It's simple, slow, and uncluttered—and it reveres authenticity above all.

—Tadao Ando

There are artists who leave their mark in the studio; others take their studios out into the world. A reduced group does both. Among this decidedly entrepreneurial bunch is Brooklyn-based, Mexican polymath Bosco Sodi. A full-time painter and carver of stone and clay, he is also a committed educator, a performance artist, an exhibition maker, a collector of first-rate architecture, the director of a widely esteemed artist-residency, and a world-renowned social sculptor.

This last pursuit—which features the artist promoting art as an activity capable of improving society and the environment—encapsulates Sodi at his most public. The creator of a generously rustic aesthetic, his ethos is made material both in his gritty paintings and in his 21st century minimalist, pre-Columbian inspired *gesamtkunstwerk*: Casa Wabi. A total work of art that is constantly adapting and changing according to the challenges of the times, the non-profit art and community-education complex the artist founded eight years ago in Puerto Escondido on Mexico's Oaxacan Coast has, over time, become a major creative port-of-call. Long known as a sanctuary for national and international artists, it naturally served as a safe haven for Sodi and his family during the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Like many museum exhibitions launched as the world gradually emerges from lockdown, this one has undergone important changes. Celebrated a full calendar year after it was initially scheduled, the show includes, as originally intended, work from Sodi's celebrated painting series "Vers l'Espagne"—the seven large-scale works in the exhibition pay homage to Joan Miró's triptych *Peinture sur fond blanc pour la cellule d'un solitaire* (painting on a white background for the cell of a recluse)—but also newer pieces the artist produced over lockdown. Miró's paintings, as noted by writer P.F. Chan, consist of white canvases each embellished with a solitary trembling line: "a simple gesture that spoke volumes about minimalism and freedom." Similarly, Sodi's more topographical versions of Miró's monochromes confront the pictorial void—its real-world analogues today are uncertainty and meaninglessness—but with a hard-won earthiness that warrants renewed consideration. In keeping with the artist's spirit of resilience, we have chosen to rechristen Sodi's exhibition of recent and brand-new work *Básico*.

Básico brings together Sodi's various sources of artistic inspiration as an example of sustainable art making in the U.S., Mexico, and elsewhere (Casa Wabi also operates Casa Nano, a second residency program in Japan, as well as exhibition spaces in Oaxaca and Mexico City). Consisting of his original suite of powerful 2019 paintings—unlike Miró's metaphysical canvases, the coarse surfaces of his "Vers l'Espagne" paintings invoke natural formations such as creek beds as well as the footpaths trod by Mexican and Central American immigrants on their way north to the U.S.—the exhibition features several additional bodies of work made during quarantine. These include ten solid clay spheres the artist has termed "perfect bodies," twenty-two flag-like works he calls "Sun Paintings," and nineteen sculptures made by children who attended the Casa Wabi art center. Among the messages of the exhibition: challenging times demand a return to what is *Básico*—art, community, and education.

If *Básico* features Sodi's textured landscape-like paintings, his rough-hewn ceramic sculptures push even further into the artist's preferred arena: a place of "silence, contemplation, and the passing of time" in which it's possible to consider life at its most elemental, as well as "our all-important relationship with the earth." To give shape and heft to his vision, Sodi cut large clay blocks directly from the ground in Oaxaca and shaped them by hand into spheres, hardening each via a complex process that took months to complete. (According to Sodi, the process includes drying the spheres in both the sun and shade before "burning in a rustic kiln for sixteen to twenty hours.") Perfectly imperfect, the sculptures take on the appearance of totems of an ancient civilization or, alternately, monuments to a far more advanced one. Uneven, blistered, and sometimes cracked, each orb evidences the results of the natural processes the artist fully embraces.

Sodi's new paintings on chili pepper sacks also welcome nature as a partner in an artistic practice that prizes and promotes imperfection and authenticity. Made during lockdown, these "Sun Paintings" were made using materials that were readily available at Casa Wabi in the spring of 2020. Since there was no canvas, Sodi painted red, orange, and yellow suns at different positions in a burlap sky on sacks previously used to store chilies. The odor of the peppers still emanates from the compositions, adding a further layer to objects that Daisetz T. Suzuki, the world's leading authority on Zen Buddhism, would have likely described as embodying "an active aesthetical appreciation of poverty." Similar to *Arte Povera*—the 1960s Italian avant-garde movement that made use of commonplace materials to criticize late capitalism—Sodi's paintings are made to question, among other values, the place of art today, as well as the conventional roles of cultural institutions; all while proposing newly collaborative ideas for our uncertain time (read: the extended period of quarantine and distancing engendered by the pandemic).

Which leads us directly back to Casa Wabi, both the expansive artist residency designed by Tadao Ando and other architects (among them, Alberto Kalach and Álvaro Siza), and the ambitious community art program developed by Sodi's Casa Wabi Foundation, which also finds its headquarters on the Oaxaca campus. Based on in-depth research carried out by a local historian (Genaro Guevara) and anthropologist (Denise Lechner), the foundation has designed bespoke programs for regional schools, artisans, cooperatives, and other groups in eleven separate communities that seek, among other results, to boost the local economy through traditional handicrafts; promote the conservation of local species; and foster the development of natural resources in the area. Among these activities are also arts education projects aimed at local elementary and middle school children.

In October of 2020, and with the full use of COVID-19 protocols, Casa Wabi Foundation carried out a clay workshop at the nearby Escuela Jaime Nunó and the Escuela Lázaro Cárdenas. The last works featured in the artistic remit generously proposed by Bosco Sodi for the exhibition *Básico* were made by Mexico's newest generation of artists. Their names are Aimar Arreola, Abigail Morán Candela, Paola Joselin Carrera, Odilia Dayana Contreras, Leonela Jacqueline Galindo, César Ángel Gil, Jesús Guadalupe Hernández Villegas, Wilber Martínez, Brayan Ricardo Montes Lagos, Sherlyn Nicolás, Darina Zurit Santiago, Ashley Vázquez, Irene Evelin Vázquez Vázquez, and William Alberto Zárate. Together, they celebrate with us their first international museum outing—alongside renowned artist, place-maker, and social-sculptor Bosco Sodi.

Christian Viveros-Fauné

Curator-at-Large

USF Contemporary Art Museum

Bosco Sodi: *Tabula Rasa* (Tampa)
Sarah Howard

Inspired by Earth's universal cycles of growth, Bosco Sodi's participatory public art project *Tabula Rasa*, Latin for "clean slate," symbolizes new beginnings. First installed on May 23, 2021, in New York City's Washington Square Park, the project included 439 clay spheres transformed into seedpods. Each sphere, embedded with the sacred trinity of corn, squash, and bean seeds, represented a day that had passed since the date the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted "normal life" in the United States. By inviting members of the public to collect the seedpods to plant, germinate, and cultivate in their own domestic settings, Sodi disseminated a transformative message of hope, care, and mutual assistance through individual and collective action.

Tabula Rasa (Tampa) continues Sodi's dialogue with Earth and its material elements and processes in the wake of *Muro*, his first participative art performance (it was presented at NYC's Washington Square Park in 2017, outside London's National Theatre in 2018, and at USFCAM in Tampa in 2019). For *Muro*, Spanish for "wall," Sodi invited the public to dismantle a temporary wall constructed of more than 1000 unique clay timbers. Handmade and fired with the assistance of local craftsmen at Casa Wabi, his studio in Oaxaca, Mexico, each brick was stamped with the artist's signature and distributed with a certificate of authenticity to mark the participants' co-ownership of the ephemeral public artwork. Expanding on Sodi's ongoing exploration of organic processes beyond his control, *Muro* and its performance underscore the belief that collective action has the potential to overcome barriers and obstacles present throughout society.

Building on Sodi's previous NYC iteration, USFCAM's public presentation of *Tabula Rasa* (Tampa) engaged the community in the collaborative and creative process of making the clay seedpods. At a public workshop at USF College of The Arts, participants crafted hundreds of seedpods, shaping the small clay spheres by hand, and embedding each with three heirloom corn seeds. USFCAM and the student organization CAM Club partnered with Meacham Urban Farm, an organic farm and market located in downtown Tampa, to install the seedpods among the farm's crops. At a public event at the farm on February 12th, 2022, the artist invited public visitors to claim their seedpod to plant, nurture, and harvest, thus highlighting indigenous Mexican agricultural practices and their impact on food cultivation and sustainability in the United States. As part of the participatory event, Meacham Urban Farm also offered a planting demonstration and farm tour emphasizing the sustainable farming practices employed at the farm.

Sodi's work is all about material simplicity. It engages the cycles of life and death to harness the spirit and power of creative transformation by offering what he considers vessels for new life—an opportunity to begin anew without prejudice. In a time of continuing uncertainty and disruption, *Tabula Rasa* (Tampa) is a gesture within the public sphere intended to focus on the care, hope, and future potential of our individual and collective lives as nurtured through a shared experience of growth and sustenance with ourselves and one another.

Sarah Howard
Curator of Public Art and Social Practice
USF Institute for Research in Art